Hillbilly Elegy

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF J. D. VANCE

J.D. Vance was born in the Appalachian region of Ohio in the mid-1980s. The grandson of what he calls "hillbilly" grandparents, he grew up witnessing his mother's drug addiction and restless lifestyle. Because of this, his grandparents played a large role in his life, teaching him the "hillbilly" values they themselves learned growing up in eastern Kentucky. Despite the environment he grew up in, which set a precedent for drug use and domestic abuse, Vance managed to escape the poverty of his youth. He enrolled in the Marines after graduating high school and eventually served the United States in the Iraq War. Upon returning, he attended Ohio State University and, later, Yale Law School. He then proceeded to work as a venture capitalist before founding a nonprofit called Our Ohio Renewal, which focuses on the state's opioid problem. In addition to his role at Our Ohio Renewal, he now regularly appears on CNN.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many readers come to *Hillbilly Elegy* hoping it will help them understand the events of the 2016 presidential election, in which Donald Trump won the favor of white working-class voters—a fact that significantly contributed to his victory. But Vance's book focuses more on his own life and on the problems the hillbilly community faces than on the reasons white poor people gravitated toward Trump. When he *does* evoke politics, it is most often to explain his suspicion that federal policy reform will be able to effectively address Appalachia's problems, which he believes deserve to be treated on a smaller, more social level. At the same time, Vance quickly mentions the fact that the older generation of hillbillies were traditionally democrats because they believed the Democratic party fought for the "working man"; however, he does not spend time analyzing Appalachia's shift from the Democratic to Republican parties. Although Vance doesn't concern himself with political history, he does outline some key points of the United States's economic history. In particular, he tracks the prominence of Armco, a steel manufacturing company in Middletown, Ohio. Armco opened its doors in 1900 and began recruiting workers in nearby regions, including Jackson, Kentucky. Vance uses Armco as an example of something that attracted people to the "industrial Midwest" from Appalachia. There were, he writes, "two major waves" of this migration, one after World War I "when returning veterans found it nearly impossible to find work in the not-yet-industrialized mountains of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee," and another in the 1940s and '50s. By the time Vance was a child, Armco employed a significant amount of Middletown's population. As a result, many high school students assumed they could stay in their hometown and find gainful employment, an attitude that has become perhaps too unrealistic in contemporary times, when America is still recovering from the Great Recession of 2008, which significantly slowed down the country's manufacturing output. In addition to young people's unfounded optimism that they'll be able to secure a job at Armco, Vance laments that this attitude keeps Middletown's youth from aspiring toward true upward mobility.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hillbilly Elegy examines a population of the United States that is often overlooked in mainstream culture: poor white people in rural areas. The scope of its investigation ranges from the first half of the 20th century to 2016, but because it is also about J.D. Vance's upbringing, it spends most of its efforts considering the 1980s, '90s, and early 2000s. But the contemporary interest in the origins of "hillbilly" poverty goes beyond Vance's personal life, a fact made clear by books like Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, which was also published in 2016. In *White Trash*, Isenberg puts more emphasis on studying history to understand the class divides in America, going all the way back to the 17th century to explain the current perception of hillbillies in the United States. Another thematically related book is *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* by the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild. To write her account of rural poverty, Hochschild traveled to Louisiana from her liberal hometown of Berkeley, California. Whereas Vance focuses on general attitudes rather than on politics, Hochschild seeks to understand how and why the working-class has so strongly migrated from the left to the right of the political spectrum. As such, it's easy to see that all three of these books approaches the same interest in hillbilly culture with a different focus: one is autobiographical, one is historical, and another is pointedly political.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis
- **When Published:** June 28, 2016
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Non-fiction
- **Genre:** Memoir, Autobiographical Ethnography
- **Setting:** Middletown, Ohio and the greater Appalachian region

- **Climax:** Because *Hillbilly Elegy* follows the shape of J.D. Vance's life, there isn't one climax that stands out in particular. Rather, the book consists of many smaller moments of tension, often revolving around his mother's drug use and the domestic violence he witnessed as a child.
- **Antagonist:** The cyclical nature of Appalachian poverty, which leads many working-class Americans to refuse responsibility for their own shortcomings, an attitude that makes it easier for them to continue thoughtlessly abusing drugs and fighting with one another.
- **Point of View:** First-person narration from Vance's perspective.

EXTRA CREDIT

Film. Ron Howard, the director of *A Beautiful Mind* and *The Da Vinci Code* (among other films) is set to direct a movie version of Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*.

PLOT SUMMARY

J.D. Vance begins his memoir by explaining that he is not a politician or an academic. He is simply somebody who grew up in Appalachia's working class and who found a way to achieve upward mobility against the statistical odds, which indicated that he would—as the grandson of hillbillies and the son of a drug addict—fail to graduate high school and likely succumb to drug addiction and domestic violence. His remarkable ability to avoid this fate, though, is not the reason he wrote *Hillbilly Elegy*. Rather, he wrote the book so that people could "understand what happens in the lives of the poor and the psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on their children."

Hillbillies, Vance explains, descend from Scots-Irish Americans, who migrated to the United States from Scotland in the 18th and 19th centuries. For this group of people, "poverty is the family tradition," and hardly anybody earns college degrees. Like Vance's relatives, many Scots-Irish Americans live in the hills of Kentucky. Although Vance himself spent most of his childhood in Middletown, Ohio—where many hillbilly families migrated in order to work at **Armco Steel**, a generous employer of formally uneducated workers—he identifies Jackson, Kentucky as his true home. This is because his grandparents, Mamaw and Papaw, spent the majority of their lives in Jackson. Family lore revolves around the town, and Vance illustrates the importance of the hillbilly oral storytelling tradition. He writes about his great-uncles—Mamaw's brothers—who he idolized as a child. They used to sit around and tell him spectacular tales. These stories were hardly appropriate for a child, but Vance reveled in the "hillbilly justice" each narrative advanced. In fact, the oral storytelling tradition often emphasized the hillbilly community's strong values: loyalty and honor. Vance's Uncle Pet, for example, once told a story about a man named Big Red who insulted his mother. After warning Big Red to retract his words, Uncle Pet beat him unconscious and ran an electric saw up and down his body. Big Red survived, but he never pressed charges because "he knew what it meant to insult a man's mother."

Having outlined the importance of honor and loyalty in hillbilly culture, Vance enumerates the many troubles plaguing Kentucky and the greater region of Appalachia. Even now—or perhaps *especially* now—drug addiction runs rampant throughout the working class community, along with the dietary trappings of unhealthy lifestyles that depend on fast food and sugary sodas. Seeking a better life, Vance's grandparents moved from Kentucky to Ohio, where Papaw took a job at Armco Steel. They had married as teenagers in Kentucky in 1947, two members of well-known hillbilly families. The young couple moved to Ohio because Papaw's only other option was to work in the Kentucky coal mines, a prospect that would bring his family little in the way of satisfaction or stability. Mamaw and Papaw had three children: Vance's Uncle Jimmy, his Aunt Wee, and his mother, Bev. Unfortunately, Papaw had a serious drinking problem, an issue Mamaw met with intense scorn. She refused to allow her husband to continue his boozy lifestyle, and after many arguments—which included displays of domestic violence on both sides—she warned Papaw that she would murder him if he ever came home drunk again. When he ignored her several nights later, she poured gasoline on him while he slept on the couch and lit him on fire. Luckily, Aunt Wee—who was eleven at the time—sprang to life and put the fire out. Papaw finally quit drinking years later, and although he and Mamaw separated and decided to live in different houses, they continued to spend all of their time with one another.

Vance asserts that children who witness the kind of domestic discord Mamaw and Papaw were involved in are statistically more likely to lead difficult lives themselves. Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Wee, though, managed to make it out of childhood to establish stable lives (though Aunt Wee's first relationship was abusive). Unfortunately, Bev succumbed to the statistical odds and embarked on a life of drug addiction and unstable romantic partnerships. She gave birth to Vance during her second marriage, which disintegrated not long afterward. Her next husband, Bob Hamel, adopted Vance and was a relatively kind man, and the family achieved something like stability for a small stretch of time, during which J.D. attended school and developed a love for reading. Despite her many flaws, Vance admits that his mother "believed deeply in the promise of education" and worked to instill this belief in her children.

Mamaw and Papaw figured greatly into Vance's life, since they lived in a nearby house. This relatively calm period came to a close, though, when Bev and Bob decided to move away from Middletown because they felt like Mamaw and Papaw were encroaching upon their autonomy. Vance was devastated to lose easy access to his grandparents—whom he considered his

best friends—and, to make matters worse, the move brought with it the first domestic disputes of Bev and Bob's marriage. Because Bev had inherited Mamaw's characteristic temper, she never backed down from a fight. Vance notes that his mother's arguments with his stepfather were his first model of how to go about solving marital disagreements, a process that often involved throwing plates and screaming at one another. As a result of the turmoil he witnessed in his private life, he began to do poorly in school, staying up late and listening with his sister Lindsay to Bob and Bev's arguments.

One day, Vance returned from school to find that Mamaw had paid an unexpected visit. She'd come because Vance's mother had attempted to commit suicide after a particularly raucous argument with Bob, who had apparently discovered that she was having an affair and subsequently demanded a divorce. Although Bev drove her car headlong into a telephone pole, she managed to survive. Mamaw doubted her daughter's intentions, believing that Bev had tried to make it look as if she wanted to die in order to win sympathy and take everybody's attention off of her affair. In the aftermath of this fiasco, J.D., Lindsay, and their mother moved back to Middletown, where they lived in a home that was even closer to Mamaw and Papaw's than before. During this period, Bev went into a downward spiral of irresponsible behavior, and started dating men who never stayed around for very long.

One day, when Vance was upset at Bev for her erratic behavior, she apologized to him and promised to drive him to the mall to buy him football cards. On the way, she grew angry with him and started speeding on the highway, promising that she would crash the car and kill them both. J.D. jumped into the backseat, prompting her to pull over so that she could "beat the shit out of" him. When the car stopped, though, he ran through a large field until he came upon a woman floating in a backyard swimming pool. "My mom is trying to kill me," he said, pleading with the woman to call Mamaw. Getting out of the pool, she took him inside and to the phone. Meanwhile, Bev arrived and hammered away at the door, eventually breaking it down and snatching J.D. Fortunately, though, the woman had called the police, who quickly appeared to take Bev away. When she was later tried for a domestic violence misdemeanor, J.D. was called upon to testify against her. Instead, he lied, saying that she had never threatened him. He did this to protect his mother, but also because he had made a deal with her that if he refrained from casting her as abusive, he could live with Mamaw and Papaw whenever he wanted.

Papaw died shortly after Bev started dating a new man named Matt, and his death affected the entire family. Mamaw, who was normally so inexhaustible and strong, revealed emotional vulnerabilities. More importantly, Bev descended into a prescription drug habit that had been slowly gaining momentum. More than anybody else, she was devastated by Papaw's death, a fact she took pains to emphasize, telling even her children that they didn't have the right to be as sad as her because Papaw was *her* father. After attacking Matt one day, Bev was arrested and admitted to a drug rehabilitation center, a period in which J.D. relied on Lindsay—who had just graduated high school—for support. Finally, when J.D. finished eighth grade, his mother was almost one year sober and Lindsay had married a man named Kevin.

Before J.D. started high school, Bev insisted that he move with her and Matt to Dayton, Ohio, effectively isolating him once again from his structures of support (school and Mamaw). J.D. refused to do so, instead opting to live with his biological father, Don, with whom he'd recently reconnected. Don was also from Kentucky, and although by all accounts he had been a terrible husband and father—sometimes even physically abusing Bev—he had made drastic changes to his life, turning to Christian evangelism and starting a new family that strictly followed the rules of the church. This appealed to J.D., who yearned for a dependable community. As such, he happily went to live with Don. Despite the peace and stability of Don's home, though, J.D. felt constantly on-guard in his new life, a feeling that eventually encouraged him to move in with Mamaw, with whom he stayed for the remainder of the summer before finally consenting to live with Bev and Matt for fear of overstraining his grandmother.

As J.D. advanced through high school, his mother's drug addiction continued, along with her tumultuous and ever-changing romantic life. After years of attending Narcotics Anonymous to support his mother just to watch her continue to use drugs, Vance finally decided to live full-time with Mamaw, a decision he believes saved his life. Immediately, his grades in school improved and he lost all interest in hanging out with other kids who smoked marijuana or drank alcohol. He was even accepted to college at Ohio State University, though when the time came to commit, he felt unprepared. He knew that going to college would be an investment in his future, but he couldn't shake the feeling that "not all investments are good investments." Mamaw framed education as "the only damned thing worth spending money on," but he decided to postpone higher education, opting instead to join the Marines—a challenge that seemed insurmountable, considering that he was out of shape and severely lacked discipline.

Although she was apprehensive, Mamaw supported J.D. by sending him letters while he was in boot camp. The experience of constant exercise and psychological challenge transformed him, giving him confidence and agency he could never have fathomed before entering the Marines. Not long before Vance shipped out to Iraq in 2005, Mamaw died, leaving him truly on his own for the first time in his life, though now he had gained a sense of self-sufficiency. Thankfully, he served in the Iraq War without sustaining any injuries, and when he returned, he finally attended Ohio State University. This was an intense period, as he worked multiple jobs while taking classes, but J.D.

had come to appreciate the value of pushing himself toward his goals. As a result, he graduated in only one year and eleven months. He then set about applying to law schools. On his second round of applications, he was accepted to Yale Law School, where he ended up receiving his degree.

During his time at Yale, Vance was forced time and again to confront the gaping class divide between his hillbilly upbringing and the wealthy, elite environment in which he now found himself. Luckily, he became close with a classmate named Usha, who often helped him navigate social situations (one time, for example, he called her from the bathroom of a fancy restaurant, where he was meeting a prestigious prospective employer, to ask which piece of silverware he should use first). He and Usha ended up dating, eventually marrying after they graduated from law school.

Vance notes that even after successfully attaining upward mobility, he still often finds himself drawn back to the uglier sides of his original community. One night not long after his graduation from Yale, for example, he drove to Middletown to pay for his mother to stay in a rundown motel because her fifth husband had kicked her out after she started using heroin. "Upward mobility is never clean-cut, and the world I left always finds a way to reel me back in," he writes. This is not something he is ashamed of, though—rather, he embraces his responsibility as a successful, stable representative of the hillbilly class, doing what he can to support young people who struggle with the same demons he himself had to face as a teenager.

Hillbilly Elegy is first and foremost a memoir, but it also examines the Appalachian working class at large, often incorporating sociological studies to supplement Vance's life story and proposing possible new ways of thinking about poverty. Although these efforts are too numerous to include here, it's worth noting that Vance holds up religion and education as two means by which young people can attain upward mobility. And although he outlines various governmental and economic ideas that contribute to the current situation in Appalachia, he maintains that the best way to address rural poverty is not with policy changes, but with *social* changes. Too many hillbillies, he says, blame the government and various external figures for their own misfortune, and this allows them to shy away from responsibility and hard work. As such, a pervasive attitude adjustment is called for, one that takes into account the working class's "problems of family, faith, and culture."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

J.D. Vance – The author and narrator of *Hillbilly Elegy*. As the memoir reveals, Vance grew up in working-class Middletown, Ohio, but he views his true home as Jackson, Kentucky, where his mother, Bev, was raised and where his hillbilly grandparents, Mamaw and Papaw, had deep familial and cultural roots. As a child, Vance witnessed his mother's addiction to drugs and her eventful love life, which brought multiple father figures into his life for short periods at a time. Many of these romantic partners tangled with his argumentative mother, laying waste to the household and disrupting Vance's domestic life, ultimately causing his academic success to suffer. Luckily, he found support in Mamaw and Papaw, who lent him a sense of stability along with his older sister, Lindsay. Vance finally decided to live with Mamaw permanently in the final years of his high school education in order to escape his mother's toxic influence. As a result, his grades improved and he was accepted to Ohio State University, though he postponed attending in order to join the Marines, where he learned the importance of discipline and personal agency. After serving in Iraq, he finally went to college and eventually attended Yale Law School, where he met his future wife, Usha. Having experienced both the life of a hillbilly and the life of a successful lawyer, Vance has a unique perspective on the notion of upward mobility. He is simultaneously proud of his hillbilly values—which champion loyalty and honor above all else—and critical of his community's shortcomings. Throughout the memoir, he demonstrates his ability to balance these two perspectives in order to craft a well-considered account of working-class Appalachia.

Mamaw – Vance's grandmother, and Bev's mother. Having spent most of her life in Jackson, Kentucky, Mamaw came from a family that "would shoot at you rather than argue with you." Vance makes clear that she was incredibly loyal—especially when it came to family—and she detested when hillbillies betrayed one another. When she was young, for example, she caught a man trying to steal her family's cow. She held the thief at gunpoint and would have killed him if her brother (whom J.D. calls Uncle Pet) hadn't intervened. Mamaw's relationship with Papaw (her husband) was complicated, considering that the couple fought aggressively in their younger years, especially when Papaw had a drinking problem. Still, they had three children: J.D's Uncle Jimmy, his Aunt Wee, and his mother. Although they separated and eventually moved into different houses in Middletown, Ohio, Mamaw and Papaw continued to spend every day with one another, having reconciled their differences in old age. Mamaw served as a guardian to J.D., giving him love and support when he needed it most. When Bev was unable to properly care for him, it was Mamaw who shouldered the burden of raising Vance. Importantly, she also encouraged him to pursue higher education, which ultimately helped him escape poverty.

Papaw – Vance's grandfather, and Bev's father. Like Mamaw, his wife, he grew up in Jackson, Kentucky and fully embodied the hillbilly lifestyle. In his early years of fatherhood, he was a ferocious drinker who rarely came home sober from a day's work. Mamaw found this behavior unacceptable and even took

violent measures to put an end to his drinking: one evening after he came home drunk, she doused him in gasoline and lit him on fire while he was sleeping. If not for Vance's Aunt Wee, Papaw and Mamaw's eleven-year-old daughter, he would have burned to death. Eventually, he quit drinking, though not before he and Mamaw decided to live in separate houses in Middletown. Nonetheless, they reconciled their differences and continued to spend everyday with one another for the rest of his life, though they kept their individual houses. Papaw was a very influential figure in J.D.'s life because he promoted the importance of education, taking the time to sit down with his grandson after school each day to quiz him on increasingly difficult mathematical equations. A steelworker at **Armco**—Middletown's largest manufacturing plant—he insisted that J.D. should make his money with his mind rather than with his hands, a message that communicated the value of intellectual pursuits. When Papaw died, the entire family was devastated, especially J.D.'s mother, who subsequently plunged deeper into a downward spiral of drug addiction.

Bev Vance – J.D.'s mother, and the daughter of Mamaw and Papaw. J.D. writes that, unlike her brother Jimmy and her sister Lori, Bev succumbed to the statistical odds of growing up in an unstable home that modeled a cycle of substance abuse and domestic violence. In adulthood, Bev found herself unable to settle down with only one partner, instead constantly rotating through new boyfriends and husbands—father figures who flew in and out of J.D.'s young life. Like Mamaw, Bev is brash, hot-headed, and never willing to back down from a fight. This attitude is compounded by her addictive personality, as she fuels her own fury and instability with various harmful substances. When J.D. was growing up, she used to stay out late drinking, and when Papaw died, she developed a serious dependency on prescription narcotics—a dependency that eventually led her to heroin. As such, she was in and out of rehab throughout the course of Vance's teenage years, constantly proving herself unworthy of his trust before begging for his forgiveness and help. Although he doesn't shy away from portraying his mother unfavorably, Vance makes sure to point out Bev's positive qualities. A former nurse, she is incredibly intelligent and values the importance of education. She was even the salutatorian of her high school class, though she had to postpone a college degree because she gave birth to J.D.'s sister Lindsay shortly after graduating. Despite the fact that she failed to support her children, Vance notes that she did, at least, instill in them the sense that intellectual pursuits are worthwhile.

Lindsay – Bev's daughter and J.D.'s half-sister, though he considers her a full sibling, considering the fact that they are so close. When Bev was acting up on drugs or fighting with her lovers, Lindsay comforted J.D. and took on the household's responsibilities. To this day, J.D. still turns to his sister for advice, considering her the person he's "proudest to know." He writes that she was always "more adult than child," and he remains forever grateful for the role she played in his life as his most immediate means of support.

Aunt Wee (Lori Vance) – J.D.'s aunt, and Bev's younger sister. Aunt Wee dropped out of high school at the age of sixteen and quickly married an abusive husband who forbade her from visiting the rest of her family. With the help of Mamaw and Papaw, she escaped this situation, got a job working in radiology, and remarried a kind man. Throughout *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance calls upon Aunt Wee's memories and anecdotes to fill out his depiction of other family members and defining moments in his life. He also frequently uses Aunt Wee's new life as a model for what it might look like to leave behind the downsides of hillbilly life and the cycles of abuse it sometimes perpetuates.

Uncle Jimmy – J.D.'s uncle, and Bev's older brother. Despite the toxic domestic environment created by Mamaw and Papaw's constant fighting, Jimmy found a way to graduate high school, attend night school, and attain a sales job with Johnson & Johnson. Like J.D.'s Aunt Wee, he managed to establish a stable life, one that Vance references and calls upon throughout the memoir, holding it up as an example of the kind of rare success available to determined Appalachian individuals. Although Jimmy is a levelheaded and kind person, he remains to this day unwilling to speak to Bev, who he believes is irresponsible and selfish.

Usha – J.D.'s wife, formerly one of his fellow students at Yale Law School. Usha and Vance started dating while they were still in the program, a relationship that eventually led to marriage. Vance frequently turns to Usha for guidance in navigating the upper-middle-class environment in which he now lives. Though she respects his working-class background, she helps him leave behind the bad habits instilled in him by hillbilly culture, such as his tendency to quickly respond to adversity with intense anger. When they were first becoming serious as a couple, they had to work through Vance's poor conflict resolution skills; at the first sign of an argument, he would shut down and remove himself from the situation. This was because he had only ever seen adults abuse one another (verbally or physically) during disagreements, and he didn't want this to happen with Usha. Fortunately, Usha helped him see that this was not a productive way to approach difficult situations, ultimately bringing him around to the idea that it is okay to encounter conflicts in a relationship and that healthy conversation is, in fact, always an option.

Bob Hamel – One of Bev's husbands, who she married after divorcing Don Bowman. Bob officially adopted J.D. and treated him and Lindsay well, but Mamaw disliked him because he came from the same social class she did. Vance writes that Mamaw hated him because of "the parts of him that most resembled her," meaning that she was disappointed her daughter didn't marry somebody who might represent the first step toward

upward mobility. And although their marriage was initially peaceful, Bev and Bob started fighting both verbally and physically. J.D. even punched Bob in the face once in order to defend his mother. When he found out that Bev was having an affair, Bob divorced her and moved away, and it soon became clear that he would not remain involved in J.D.'s life, despite the fact that he had become the boy's official father.

Don Bowman – J.D.'s biological father. Mamaw and Bev claimed that Don was an abusive husband and a neglectful parent, a father who willingly abandoned the family. When as a teenager Vance reconnected with him, though, he heard a different side of the story: that Don had fought tirelessly to attain custody of J.D. during the divorce and that the only reason he backed off was because he worried the battle was negatively affecting the boy. Regardless of what happened, it was clear to J.D. that his father had completely changed—now he lived a quiet life with his new wife and children, a life organized around Christian evangelism. Because J.D.'s childhood lacked a formal religious presence, his father's church greatly appealed to him. He even lived with Don for several weeks once when his mother decided to move away from Middletown with her boyfriend Matt, and though he enjoyed the peace of his father's family and religion, he soon left them behind to go live with Mamaw.

Uncle Pet – One of Mamaw's brothers, or—as J.D. refers to them—the "Blanton boys." Vance considers Pet and his other great-uncles the "gatekeepers of the family's oral tradition." In one particularly gruesome story about hillbilly justice (the uncles' favorite topic), Pet told his young nephew about a man named Big Red who insulted his—Pet's—mother. In response, Pet dragged Big Red from his truck, beat him unconscious, and ran an electric saw up and down his body.

Big Red – A truck driver who, while making a delivery, told Uncle Pet, "Off-load this now, you son of a bitch." Uncle Pet warned him against speaking like that about his mother, but Big Red refused to back down. Consequently, Pet beat him unconscious and took an electric saw to his skin. Although he almost bled to death, Big Red didn't press charges against Pet because "he knew what it meant to insult a man's mother."

Amy Chua – A professor at Yale Law School. Amy served as Vance's mentor while he worked toward his law degree, advising him in terms of both academics and personal life. In fact, it was Amy who encouraged him to focus on his relationship with Usha, which she correctly identified as important and worthy of Vance's full attention.

Matt – One of Bev's boyfriends, who she dated when J.D. was thirteen. Matt was a firefighter and a genuinely kind person. J.D. refers to him as his "favorite of all of [Bev's] men," and notes that he still keeps in touch with him. Unfortunately, Bev abruptly left Matt when she decided to marry Ken, a man she'd just met.

Ken – Bev's boss at a dialysis center. Bev met Ken while she was still dating Matt, and several months later decided to marry him. For a brief period, J.D. went to live with Ken and his three children, but the relationship didn't last long, partially (but certainly not completely) because J.D. didn't get along with his new stepsiblings.

Brian – A teenager from Kentucky who reminds Vance of himself as a fifteen-year-old. Like Bev, Brian's mother is addicted to drugs. Furthermore, he has a complicated relationship with his father. Not long after Vance took Brian out to a fast-food restaurant, his mother died. Vance uses Brian's story as a way of considering what will happen to Appalachia's young people who seem to have no opportunities available to them.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Uncle Teaberry – One of Mamaw's brothers, whom Vance refers to as the "Blanton boys." He was the oldest of the Blanton clan, and the meanest, too.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE HILLBILLY IDENTITY

Having grown up in a working class Ohio town primarily populated by emigrants from the hills of Eastern Kentucky, J.D. Vance makes an effort in *Hillbilly Elegy* to clarify what it means to be a "hillbilly." Including himself in this demographic, he explains that hillbillies are white Americans of Scots-Irish descent for whom "poverty is the family tradition." For generations, they have been uneducated laborers fiercely dedicated to their own communities and traditions and remarkably resistant to change. And despite the poverty and social isolation they live in, hillbillies are proud of their culture. Throughout the memoir, Vance both celebrates and laments this pride. On the one hand, he praises the fact that his Appalachian working class community values loyalty and honor above all else. On the other hand, he shows that these same values often cause the community to remain trapped in a constant state of poverty and dependency. Moving between these two viewpoints, he is able to offer an account of the hillbilly identity that balances an insider's familiarity and compassion with an outsider's more objective critical assessment.

Family history is deeply important to the hillbilly identity. Vance spends much of *Hillbilly Elegy*'s first chapter describing his

relatives, reaching all the way back to his great-great-grandparents. He explains that as a young child he was obsessed with his great-uncles, whom he characterizes as "the gatekeepers to the family's oral tradition." Whenever Vance visited Jackson, Kentucky—where his family is from—he listened to these great-uncles (the "Blanton men") as they told stories about themselves and their relatives. And although the stories were often violent and inappropriate for a child, Vance reveled in the family lore; "Some people may conclude that I come from a clan of lunatics. But the stories made me feel like hillbilly royalty, because these were classic good-versus-evil stories, and my people were on the right side. My people were extreme, but extreme in the service of something—defending a sister's honor or ensuring that a criminal paid for his crimes. The Blanton men, like the tomboy Blanton sister whom I called Mamaw [meaning grandma], were enforcers of hillbilly justice, and to me, that was the very best kind."

The stories that Vance's great-uncles told him largely revolve around the idea of honor and retribution. When, for example, a man named Big Red insulted the mother of Vance's Uncle Pet, Pet beat him unconscious and cut him with an electric saw. The man survived this attack and didn't press charges because he "knew what it meant to insult a man's mother." This, in turn, became a family legend that signified the importance of defending the clan's honor. In this way, Vance shows that the idea of loyalty is deeply sown throughout hillbilly culture, as it is passed down from generation to generation. And although the stories themselves may speak of unseemly events, Vance frames the purpose of each tale as pure and as "in service of" morality.

Despite the strong hillbilly inclination toward family loyalty, many of Vance's adult role models gravely mistreated one another. His grandparents, Mamaw and Papaw, had fierce fighting matches, often with violent results. Sometimes this became readily apparent to their children (one of whom was J.D's mother), as when Papaw came home drunk one night after Mamaw had warned him not to and she doused him in gasoline and lit him on fire. After this, Papaw eventually stopped drinking and they reconciled with one another—but it was too late, for the results had already taken a toll on J.D's mother, who grew into an abusive woman unable to live a drug-free life with her children and rotating cast of romantic partners. In this way, Vance portrays the downside of hillbilly culture—violence, anger, hopeless addiction—as cyclical. Though the hillbilly identity brings with it certain positive values like honor and loyalty, it also perpetuates catastrophic ways of living and relating to other people. Furthermore, even its strong commitment to loyalty sometimes proves detrimental, often leading to unnecessary violence and confrontation, as was the case when Uncle Pet took an electric saw to Big Red.

Vance is able to praise the qualities of the hillbilly identity while also observing its faults because he is what he calls a "cultural emigrant." Having experienced the life of a disenfranchised member of the working class *and* the life of a successful graduate of Yale Law School, he is a member of two worlds whose behavioral codes do not always align. Violence and combative behavior, for example, were encouraged in his childhood because they reinforced the strongholds of the hillbilly identity: honor and loyalty. As a "cultural emigrant" to the affluent middleclass, though, Vance found that these traits actually did more harm than good. Vance gives several examples of negotiating these differences, including his attempts to break out of the pattern of violent relationships he saw growing up and learn to relate to his wife through healthy disagreements. He also discusses a time when a driver cut him off and his instinct was to get out of the car and demand an apology or fight—however, even though he interpreted this driver's actions as an insult to his honor that he had to address, in his new middle class life Vance realized he no longer needed to defend his honor to win the respect of his loved ones. Thus, Vance's experience navigating between two cultures allows him to debunk the idea that hillbillies are "a bunch of slobbering morons" while also illustrating the negative elements of hillbilly life.

Vance's portrayal of the hillbilly identity is insightful and culturally sensitive because he approaches the concept with an open mind. He insists that his success in life is largely due to the support of his hillbilly grandparents and their fierce loyalty and dedication, declaring that "hillbillies are the toughest goddamned people on this earth." But he doesn't allow this faith in his cultural identity to blind him to his community's shortcomings. "Are we tough enough to look ourselves in the mirror and admit that our conduct harms children?" he asks. He himself is certainly "tough enough" to look in the mirror, a courage he clearly hopes other hillbillies will adopt. Unfortunately, this kind of self-reflection doesn't appear to be a hillbilly strength. In the memoir's introduction, Vance quotes an article about Appalachia's working class that portrays hillbillies as resistant to change; "In traveling across America, the Scots-Irish have consistently blown my mind as far and away the most persistent and unchanging regional subculture in the country." By illustrating how important it is that hillbillies assess the way they perpetuate harmful practices, Vance implies that his community must finally open themselves up to change, perhaps for the first time. They must look in the "mirror" and consider the side effects of their cultural identity.

UPWARD MOBILITY AND PERSONAL AGENCY

In *Hillbilly Elegy*, J.D. Vance outlines his rise from the poor working class to the more affluent middle class. In doing so, he considers the notion of upward mobility, portraying it as always possible yet deeply complicated. He emphasizes that a hillbilly's economic success greatly depends

upon his or her sense of personal agency. Although all the resources that lead to upward mobility may not be available to a working class kid living in poverty, Vance demonstrates that climbing the socioeconomic ladder is possible so long as a person is determined to make full use of the opportunities he or she *does* have. At the same time, he also sheds light on how difficult it can be *after* a person achieves upward mobility, making it clear that cultural complications often arise when somebody moves from one class to another. Despite his knowledge of how hard it can be to succeed in Appalachia, though, he chastises his hillbilly community for adopting complacent and cynical attitudes that quickly turn people away from even trying to climb the socioeconomic ladder in the first place.

Vance illustrates that, with very few resources, people living in Appalachian poverty must eagerly pursue the opportunities that do arise for them. He laments the seeming laziness of his hillbilly community, which he sees as growing increasingly complacent. For example, the summer before Vance attended Yale Law School, he desperately needed money, so he took a job at a nearby tile distribution business. The work was physically exhausting and the hours were long, but the pay was respectable and included health benefits. While he was there, a nineteen year-old boy came looking for work in order to support his pregnant girlfriend. The boss kindly offered him a job and even gave the boy's girlfriend an administrative position. Despite the decent pay and respectable health benefits, both the boy and his pregnant girlfriend took the job for granted, often arriving late and even neglecting to come in at all several times per week. First the girlfriend was fired, because she missed more work than the boy. Not long after, the boy was fired too. He was indignant, responding, "How could you do this to me? Don't you know I've got a pregnant girlfriend?"

Vance uses this story to depict the extent to which young Appalachians refuse to take responsibility for their own lives. "There is a lack of agency here," he writes, "a feeling that you have little control over your life and a willingness to blame everyone but yourself. This is distinct from the larger economic landscape of modern America." The fact that the boy asked how his boss could "do" this to him shows his unwillingness to recognize that he should be held accountable for his own actions. His behavior also lacked another important quality when it comes to upward mobility: foresight. Unwilling to own up to his mistakes and unable to see the correlation between doing poor work and getting fired, he put himself in a position from which it actually *was* impossible to succeed. Personal agency and responsibility, then, emerge as vital to social mobility—qualities a person must have in order to overcome the preexisting setbacks of poverty.

Vance is interested in the relationship between circumstance and agency. He asks: "How much of our lives, good and bad, should we credit to our personal decisions, and how much is just the inheritance of our culture, our families, and our parents who have failed their children?" As somebody traumatized by his mother's drug addiction and the instability it led to in his childhood, the odds were against Vance when it came to upward mobility. Worse, there was a narrative—partially based on statistics—about the impossibility of rising out of Appalachian poverty; "Surrounding me was another message: that I and the people like me weren't good enough; that the reason Middletown produced zero Ivy League graduates was some genetic or character defect. I couldn't possibly see how destructive that mentality was until I escaped it." All around him, upward mobility was cast as impossible, and this feeling of hopelessness gravely threatened his efforts to improve himself. Vance writes, "whenever people ask me what I'd most like to change about the white working class, I say, 'The feeling that our choices don't matter.'" As such, Vance attempts to reassert the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions. Any positive change, he implies, happens as a result of conscious work, not random chance and complacent thinking.

Despite the possibility of upward mobility and the importance of personal agency, Vance also reveals the ongoing difficulties that come as the result of moving from one class to another. "Upward mobility is never clean-cut," he writes. Rather, it requires one to navigate the intersection of two cultures. For somebody from working class Appalachia, this means confronting the strong sense of hillbilly loyalty. For example, when Vance saw a woman in Appalachia wearing a Yale shirt, he asked her if she attended the school. She told him that her nephew did, and asked him the same question—suddenly he felt trapped because he was "still uncomfortable admitting that [he'd] become an Ivy Leaguer." He felt in that moment like he had to make a decision: "Was I a Yale Law student, or was I a Middletown kid with hillbilly grandparents?" In the end, he decided to lie, telling her that he didn't go to Yale; "This wasn't one of my prouder moments, but it highlights the inner conflict inspired by rapid upward mobility: I had lied to a stranger to avoid feeling like a traitor." In failing to explain to the woman that he is both an "Ivy Leaguer" *and* a "Middletown kid with hillbilly grandparents," Vance inadvertently implied to himself that hillbillies are fundamentally unsuited for Ivy League education—that somebody could never be both an Appalachian and a Yale Law student. This is, of course, a conclusion Vance no doubt finds ridiculous, but he nonetheless can't help but personally feel this clash of two cultures when thrown into the tricky gray area of upward mobility, a term that he notes "necessarily implies a sort of movement—to a theoretically better life, yes, but also away from something."

In gaining financial, intellectual, and social mobility, Vance estranges himself from the circumstances of his upbringing. Of course, this doesn't mean that he condemns the process of upward mobility. Rather, he further highlights the difficulty of

rising out of Appalachian poverty by showing that the complicated process of social migration never truly ends.

POLITICS AND THE ECONOMY

Vance considers politics and the economy in *Hillbilly Elegy* for two reasons. The first is to accurately depict the circumstances that lead to Appalachian poverty and hillbilly disenfranchisement. The second is to examine what can be done to address these difficulties. Regarding the latter, Vance believes that what the hillbilly community faces is primarily a social problem rather than a governmental problem, and he believes the dilemma ought to be handled as such. Policy reform, he insists, is not going to improve the lives of the Appalachian working class.

Vance explains the hillbilly migration from Eastern Kentucky to Middletown, Ohio—a migration in which his grandparents took part. A steel company named **Armco** opened in Middletown and actively recruited in nearby Eastern Kentucky, promising residents a better life in Ohio, where they could work in the mills. This promise turned out to be true, and many Kentucky families found stability in Ohio as part of an industrial community. Mamaw and Papaw—Vance's grandparents—came to Middletown to "get out of Kentucky and give their kids a head start." While the older generation worked in the steel factories, they encouraged their children to aspire toward career-oriented jobs. Papaw once told Vance, "Your generation will make its living with their minds, not their hands." In this way, Vance's generation was told to aim higher than their parents and grandparents, but weren't given the resources to properly do so. Vance suggests that his generation often took for granted blue-collar labor without making the necessary efforts to live a different kind of life. Or, if they did make the necessary efforts to attain a different career, they often had no model to follow, since most teens would be the very first members of their families to go to college, if they even made it that far in the first place.

Eventually, Middletown residents found themselves trapped in a town that was in steep economic decline. As manufacturing became less and less lucrative, large companies (not including Armco) left Ohio, significantly limiting the job prospects in Middletown. But because the government had encouraged home ownership for nearly three decades (including policies instated by President Jimmy Carter and, later, George W. Bush), many Middletown residents found themselves with pricey mortgages to pay off, meaning that nobody would want to buy their houses because the cost would include the debt the residents had accrued as the housing market declined. Therefore, if young people wanted to seek careers, not only would they need to go to college (thereby far surpassing their parents' achievements), they would also need to somehow leave Middletown completely, a task that now proved economically difficult. Vance upholds that the working class tends to embrace cynicism when faced with these staggering challenges; "The Great Recession, and the not-great recovery that followed, had hastened Middletown's downward trajectory. But there was something almost spiritual about the cynicism of the community at large, something that went much deeper than a short-term recession." Instead of rising to overcome the economic and cultural disadvantages they faced, young Middletown residents accepted a narrative of defeat, making peace with the idea that if they were to succeed, they would need to be either lucky or naturally talented—and since most young people assumed they were neither, they excused themselves from even trying to improve their circumstances.

Vance asserts that working-class poverty and complacency is primarily a social problem, one that needs to be addressed organically on a small scale. "The most important lesson of my life," he writes, "is not that society failed to provide me with opportunities." He then goes on to list the strengths of his elementary and middle schools, along with other government-funded resources that were available to him (though not abundantly so). "These programs are far from perfect, but to the degree that I nearly succumbed to my worst decisions (and I came quite close), the fault lies almost entirely with factors outside the government's control."

According to Vance, official policies can't solve certain societal problems. For example, he outlines an unfortunate phenomenon at play in his hometown when he was a kid; "As a child, I associated accomplishments in school with femininity. Manliness meant strength, courage, a willingness to fight, and, later, success with girls. Boys who got good grades were 'sissies' or 'faggots.' I don't know where I got this feeling. […] But it was there, and studies now show that working-class boys like me do much worse in school because they view schoolwork as a feminine endeavor. Can you change this with a new law or program? Probably not." Since students are turning away from education because of what their immediate societal influences tell them about its usefulness, they shortchange themselves. The only attitude left, then, is one of cynicism and scorn, and this attitude enables people to refuse to take responsibility for their own circumstances, thereby short-circuiting any personal agency they may have. The only way to address this, Vance suggests, is by working with the society itself to change the narratives it hands down to its youngest members.

RELIGION AND EDUCATION

Hillbilly Elegy is first and foremost a memoir about J.D. Vance's life growing up in working-class Ohio with hillbilly grandparents. This means that his primary aim is to openly examine the path he took to rise out of poverty, a path that took him to college, the Marines, and to Yale Law School. It also means that the book's key purpose is not to provide answers regarding how to help the poor. However, Vance *does* gesture toward two institutions that have

a chance of improving the lives of otherwise disenfranchised working-class young people: religion and the education system. To Vance, the church is a place that can provide stability to children seeking something dependable in their lives, and education can be the first step toward upward mobility. Since Vance avoids suggesting changes to government policies, which he believes are unable to address the working class's plight, his endorsement of religion and education is the book's only tangible solution to the problems he raises.

Vance does not speak at length about organized religion in *Hillbilly Elegy* because it did not factor very much into his young life. Mamaw was religious, but she followed her own kind of spirituality. This, Vance notes, is common in Appalachia, a region in which, according to some studies, people report that they go to church more than they actually do. As such, the communities are heavily influenced by religious doctrine but lack the communal element of a churchgoing society. Still, Vance encountered serious religion when—as a teenager—he got to know his biological father, who was a devout evangelist. Witnessing his father's involvement with the church, he observed a cohesive society, in which the church didn't only offer emotional support to its members—it also offered real, substantial support that might even lead to a job. In this way, Vance frames the church as a place that creates a dependable community willing to share its resources, unlike the greater Appalachian working-class society, which lacks any kind of communal support system.

Because Vance didn't end up continuing his relationship with his biological father, he didn't use religion as his means of stability as a young man. Instead, he made his way into the Marines, which taught him discipline while also giving him a dependable community of people who weren't unemployed, using drugs, and blaming everybody but themselves for their misfortune. Later in his life, though, he came back to Christianity.

Although he doesn't spend much time in *Hillbilly Elegy* describing his return to the church, he does emphasize the benefits religion has to offer young working-class people struggling to attain stability. When he considers a young man named Brian, who reminds him of himself at a younger age, Vance writes, "Any chance he has lies with the people around him […]. Brian's mom's death was another shitty card in an already abysmal hand, but there are many cards left to deal: whether his community empowers him with a sense that he can control his own destiny or encourages him to take refuge in resentment at forces beyond his control; whether he can access a church that teaches him a lesson of Christian love, family, and purpose; whether those people who do step up to positively influence Brian find emotional and spiritual support from their neighbors." According to Vance, religion and the churchgoing community are central to the prospect of Brian's wellbeing. It's notable that he says a church might provide the young man with "family," since Brian no longer has any family left. In order to attain upward mobility—in order to identify a "purpose" in life—it is clear that Vance believes one needs a dependable network. For somebody who has nobody else to turn to, it would make sense that this network would be the church.

Vance frames education as one of the first steps toward upward mobility, but he also recognizes the challenge Appalachian children face when it comes to investing themselves in their studies. Unfortunately, the community doesn't tend to stress the importance of hard intellectual work, and the narrative surrounding education in working-class Appalachia sometimes even discourages otherwise bright students from fully applying themselves in the classroom. Vance explains that academic success is too often ridiculed rather than rewarded, especially for boys who are frequently called "sissies" or "faggots" if they do well in school. To understand why this misogynistic, homophobic mentality would so negatively affect young working-class boys, it's worth considering the extent to which hillbilly culture prides itself in the alpha-male behavior associated with protecting one's honor. il a community that champions macho violence and "a willingness to fight," it's unsurprising that being called a "sissy" would be enough to discourage a young boy from fully applying himself to his studies.

Despite Appalachia's unfortunate view of education, though, Vance strongly believes that academia is one of the most worthwhile things a young working-class person can pursue. Of course, he himself is a living example of how education can lift somebody out of unfortunate circumstances. Having been raised by an abusive, drug-addicted mother with seemingly no resources, Vance was statistically destined for mediocrity at best (or, at worst, an early death due to an overdose). Luckily, he did have *one* form of support: Mamaw. When he was deciding whether or not he should pursue higher education, his grandmother told him, "It's the only damned thing worth spending money on right now." This reinforced to him that going to college would be "an investment in [his] future." And though his mother was otherwise a difficult, harmful presence in his life, the one thing that can be said in her favor is that she taught him the importance of education. In fact, although his elders themselves weren't positive role models, they *all* took pains to instill in Vance a sense of academic rigor. Above all else, Vance sees this encouragement toward education as the primary means by which he attained upward mobility and, thus, a happy life free from the violence and chaos that so often plagues hillbilly life.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

ARMCO

The idea of upward mobility in *Hillbilly Elegy* is often wrapped up in discussions of Armco, a steel manufacturing company in Middletown, Ohio. After World War I, many working-class whites in the United States' Appalachian region found that there weren't enough jobs in the coal mines to support their families. During this period, industrial manufacturing was doing remarkably well in America, a development that lured mass waves of "hillbillies" out of Appalachia and into the industrialized Midwest. Companies like Armco even actively recruited employees in the hills of Kentucky, promising workers and their dependents economic stability. As such, Armco came to stand for opportunity in the eyes of people like Vance's grandfather, Papaw, who moved to Middletown with Mamaw to escape Kentucky and start a new life.

At Armco, Papaw received steady wages that far surpassed anything he could have earned back home. This catapulted him and Mamaw to financial stability and allowed them to raise their children without having to fret over economic concerns. But because people like Papaw saw Armco as the first rung of the socioeconomic ladder, they didn't want their children or grandchildren to work in the factory with them. "Your generation will make its living with their minds, not their hands," Papaw once told J.D. However, because his generation had pursued blue collar work, it couldn't model for its children what it might look like to pursue an intellectually-oriented career. As such, the younger generation of hillbillies in the industrial Midwest found itself trapped between two poles: they'd been told that working at Armco was beneath them, but they weren't given the necessary tools to continue their parents' trajectory of upward mobility. To make matters worse, the majority of industrial manufacturing eventually went overseas, and although Armco didn't close its doors, it certainly stopped thriving.

A Middletonian high school teacher recently told Vance that many academically unsuccessful students with few job prospects assume that they will be able to get a job at Armco because they have relatives who work there. "It's like they can't make the connection between the situation in this town and the lack of jobs at [Armco]," she told him. As such, Armco represents the disappointing cycle (or failure) of upward mobility that so many hillbilly families have experienced—at one point it symbolized opportunity and financial stability, but now it symbolizes hopelessness and complacency because of the younger generation's unfounded expectation that it will grant them the same kind of chances it granted the older generation.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Collins edition of *Hillbilly Elegy* published in 2017.

Introduction Quotes

> Today people look at me, at my job and my Ivy League credentials, and assume that I'm some sort of genius, that only a truly extraordinary person could have made it to where I am today. With all due respect to those people, I think that theory is a load of bullshit. Whatever talents I have, I almost squandered until a handful of loving people rescued me.
>
> That is the real story of my life, and that is why I wrote this book. I want people to know what it feels like to nearly give up on yourself and why you might do it. I want people to understand what happens in the life of the poor and the psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on their children. I want people to understand the American Dream as my family encountered it. I want people to understand how upward mobility really feels. And I want people to understand something I learned only recently: that for those of us lucky enough to live the American Dream, the demons of the life we left behind continue to chase us.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Vance makes an effort early in *Hillbilly Elegy* to call attention to the fact that he is not "extraordinary." Just because he went from a life of poverty and domestic abuse to the life of a Yale Law School graduate doesn't mean he possesses some form of unattainable "genius." In making this claim, he shows readers—and, he hopes, other "hillbillies"—that "talent" factors into success in a very minimal way. This prepares his audience for his eventual argument that hard work is the ultimate means of achieving upward mobility. He wants "people to understand how upward mobility really feels" because the idea of the American Dream is largely misunderstood and, therefore, all the more inaccessible for people who feel like they want to "give up" because of the "spiritual and material poverty" that has influenced them since childhood. He also goes out of his way in this passage to build the foundations of one of *Hillbilly Elegy*'s core arguments: that the process of upward mobility is constantly evolving, and that "the demons" of a person's previous life can continue to harangue them even after they have climbed the socioeconomic ladder.

This distinctive embrace of cultural tradition comes along with many good traits—an intense sense of loyalty, a fierce dedication to family and country—but also many bad ones. We do not like outsiders or people who are different from us, whether the difference lies in how they look, how they act, or, most important, how they talk. To understand me, you must understand that I am a Scots-Irish hillbilly at heart.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This passage addresses the defining traits of the hillbilly community (as Vance portrays it, at least), which descends from Scots-Irish immigrants who settled in the hills of Appalachia in the 18th century. Vance notes that outsiders have observed that the Scots-Irish people cling tightly to their cultural customs and behaviors, a fact that is evident in the way hillbillies comport themselves in contemporary times. By evoking his community's cultural history, Vance is able to show the "fierce dedication" that hillbillies harbor, thereby presenting a stronghold of the group identity from which he himself has sprung. That he is able to admit that some of these "cultural tradition[s]" are "bad"—like the tendency to prefer isolation over integration—shows Vance's willingness to fairly assess his own background. Because he himself grew up amongst hillbillies, it is natural that he should exhibit some implicit biases when discussing the culture. This is why he goes out of his way to make his hillbilly allegiances clear: "To understand me," he says, "you must understand that I am a Scots-Irish hillbilly at heart." This effectively alerts readers to his potential subjectivity; instead of trying to write an objective analysis of the white working class, Vance admits from the start that he is a "hillbilly at heart," a fact that he clearly believes is important for readers to keep in mind, and indeed lies at the heart of the memoir as a whole.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Despite their virtues, or perhaps because of them, the Blanton men were full of vice. A few of them left a trail of neglected children, cheated wives, or both. And I didn't even know them that well: I saw them only at large family reunions or during the holidays. Still, I loved and worshipped them.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker), Uncle Teaberry, Uncle Pet

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Vance offers this description of Mamaw's brothers—the Blanton men—as a way of showing both his admiration for the elders in his family and his ability to retrospectively recognize that they were, in many ways, deeply flawed. In turn this sheds light on the way the hillbilly identity works its way from generation to generation. Each family presumably has a set of elders who tells stories like the Blanton men told J.D., and each family also presumably chooses to see the good in these relatives rather than the bad. Family loyalty—a defining characteristic of the hillbilly identity—encourages hillbilly children like J.D. to ignore the "vice[s]" their relatives represent, instead "worship[ing]" them. As such, children inherit a worldview that willfully ignores "neglected children" and "cheated wives," creating a community that refuses to grapple with or take responsibility for the ugly sides of its own identity.

Chapter 2 Quotes

For starters, a remarkable stigma attached to people who left the hills of Kentucky for a better life. Hillbillies have a phrase—"too big for your britches"—to describe those who think they're better than the stock they came from. For a long time after my grandparents came to Ohio, they heard exactly that phrase from people back home. The sense that they had abandoned their families was acute, and it was expected that, whatever their responsibilities, they would return home regularly. This pattern was common among Appalachian migrants: More than nine in ten would make visits "home" during the course of their lives, and more than one in ten visited about once a month. My grandparents returned to Jackson often, sometimes on consecutive weekends, despite the fact that the trip in the 1950s required about twenty hours of driving. Economic mobility came with a lot of pressures, and it came with a lot of new responsibilities.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker), Papaw , Mamaw

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Vance examines the history of hillbilly migration to the industrial Midwest from Appalachia. In

doing so, he also considers the social and familial implications of uprooting one's life to seek out better circumstances. Unsurprisingly, hillbilly loyalty emerged as one of the most significant hurdles an upwardly mobile Appalachian emigrant had to face when leaving his or her home—on top of having to secure new jobs and fit into a strange new non-hillbilly community, these emigrants had to overcome their own relatives, who believed they had become "too big for [their] britches." This is perhaps why Mamaw and Papaw so eagerly accepted—and even encouraged—the idea that J.D. and Lindsay would surpass them on the socioeconomic ladder. After all, they themselves had experienced the "pressures" and "responsibilities" placed upon them by their family members who resented them for betraying their roots by seeking "economic mobility."

❝ Within two generations, the transplanted hillbillies had largely caught up to the native population in terms of income and poverty level. Yet their financial success masked their cultural unease, and if my grandparents caught up economically, I wonder if they ever truly assimilated. They always had one foot in the new life and one foot in the old one. They slowly acquired a small number of friends but remained strongly rooted in their Kentucky homeland.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker), Aunt Wee (Lori Vance) , Uncle Jimmy, Bev Vance, Papaw , Mamaw

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Vance looks at the effects of the mass hillbilly migration from Appalachia to the industrial Midwest, this time focusing more specifically on his grandparents' experience. He uses the term "cultural unease" to describe the difficulties they faced in "assimilate[ing]" into the culture of Middletown, Ohio, where their hillbilly values—which thrived in Appalachia—were seemingly incompatible with everyday life. "Cultural unease" is a perfect term for this phenomenon, one that is easily applicable throughout *Hillbilly Elegy*, a book that concerns itself with the factors that make it hard to transition from one class to another. Indeed, it suggests that social mobility is challenging not only because it requires hard work and financial prowess, but because it invites emotional and psychological discomfort due to culture shock. This is an important notion to keep in mind later, when Vance writes about his own journey up the socioeconomic ladder.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Even at Roosevelt Elementary—where, thanks to Middletown geography, most people's parents lacked a college education—no one wanted to have a blue-collar career and its promise of a respectable middle-class life. We never considered that we'd be lucky to land a job at Armco; we took Armco for granted.

Many kids seem to feel that way today. A few years ago I spoke with [...] a Middletown High School teacher who works with at-risk youth. "A lot of students just don't understand what's out there," she told me, shaking her head. "You have the kids who plan on being baseball players but don't even play on the high school team because the coach is mean to them. Then you have those who aren't doing very well in school, and when you try to talk to them about what they're going to do, they talk about AK. "Oh, I can get a job at AK. My uncle works there.' It's like they can't make the connection between the situation in this town and the lack of jobs at AK."

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Vance explains the sense of apathy and complacency that plagues many working-class young people, an attitude that is more complicated than it first appears. On the one hand, Middletown students assume they'll be able to get a job at Armco (now "AK": Armco-Kawasaki) because their family members work there. On the other hand, they only decide to work at Armco when they can't think of any other tangible profession—and for students who "aren't doing very well in school," there are very *few* tangible professions. As the teacher Vance spoke to pointed out, this line of thinking doesn't take into account the fact that Armco no longer represents prosperity and growth—or even stability—like it did for Mamaw and Papaw's generation. What young people fail to consider, then, is that they can't simply model themselves off of the hillbilly generations that came before them. In a world with fewer prospects, they must look elsewhere for gainful employment, a task that

often requires a college education. Unfortunately, as Vance is so eager to point out, hillbillies aren't currently fond of taking responsibility for their lives. Rather, Middletown's young people either dream big, unrealistic dreams (like that they will become famous baseball players, despite the fact that they aren't even taking the necessary steps to do so) or resort to safety-net options that aren't, in reality, options at all.

❝ One of our neighbors was a lifetime welfare recipient, but in between asking my grandmother to borrow her car or offering to trade food stamps for cash at a premium, she'd blather on about the importance of industriousness. "So many people abuse the system, it's impossible for the hardworking people to get the help they need," she'd say. This was the construct she'd built in her head: Most of the beneficiaries of the system were extravagant moochers, but she—despite never having worked in her life—was an obvious exception.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker), Mamaw

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Vance once again illustrates what he sees as the contemporary white working class's lack of self-reflexivity. People like Mamaw's neighbor seem incapable of admitting that they aren't, when it comes down to it, "hardworking people." In other words, they indulge a delusion that allows them to maintain their pride without actually having to live a life that deserves that pride—they "construct" a reality in which they aren't responsible for their own complacency. This is exactly the kind of attitude Vance scorns, for he believes it keeps hillbillies from achieving upward mobility. By blatantly lying to herself, somebody like Mamaw's neighbor ultimately shortchanges her own capacity to cultivate a sense of personal agency; she creates an excuse for herself to avoid the hard work that climbing the socioeconomic ladder demands, thereby trapping herself in a cycle of dependency and denial.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ The fallen world described by the Christian religion matched the world I saw around me: one where a happy car ride could quickly turn to misery, one where individual misconduct rippled across a family's and a community's life. When I asked Mamaw if God loved us, I asked her to reassure me that this religion of ours could still make sense of the world we lived in. I needed reassurance of some deeper justice, some cadence or rhythm that lurked beneath the heartache and chaos.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker), Mamaw

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

After an upsetting fight with his mother that leaves the entire family raw and emotional, J.D. saw Mamaw reading the Bible and asked if God really loved them. In the first sentence of his passage, he shows that religion was inherently compelling to him as a child because he could recognize elements of his own life in Biblical stories and Christian sentiments. In the Bible, piety often imposes order onto squalor and "chaos," an idea that would naturally appeal to a boy who felt as if he existed in a disordered environment. It makes sense, then, that his question to Mamaw sought "reassur[ance]" that religion could really "make sense of the world [he] lived in." This is the first time Vance portrays religion as something that can provide stability, a theme that he develops throughout *Hillbilly Elegy*, often referencing the power of a church to lend support to otherwise hopeless young people.

Despite its reputation, Appalachia—especially northern Alabama and Georgia to southern Ohio—has far lower church attendance than the Midwest, parts of the Mountain West, and much of the space between Michigan and Montana. Oddly enough, we think we attend church more than we actually do. In a recent Gallup poll, Southerners and Midwesterners reported the highest rates of church attendance in the country. Yet *actual* church attendance is much lower in the South.

This pattern of deception has to do with cultural pressure. In southwestern Ohio, where I was born, both the Cincinnati and Dayton metropolitan regions have very low rates of church attendance, about the same as ultra-liberal San Francisco. No one I know in San Francisco would feel ashamed to admit that they don't go to church. (In fact, some of them might feel ashamed to admit that they do.) Ohio is the polar opposite. Even as a kid, I'd lie when people asked if I attended church regularly. According to Gallup, I wasn't alone in feeling that pressure.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, Vance considers the idea that working-class whites frequently convince themselves they lead different kinds of lives than they actually do. When he writes, "We think we attend church more than we actually do," readers are reminded of Mamaw's neighbor, who chastised lazy welfare recipients while failing to acknowledge that she herself counted on government assistance to support her jobless lifestyle. In this case, though, Vance gives more insight into the origins of his community's self-delusion, saying that there is a cultural impetus to lie about church attendance. People say they go to church because they are "ashamed" to admit otherwise. This shows the extent to which religion is held up as an important value in the hillbilly community—even though, unfortunately (according to Vance), that same community is seemingly content to honor this value in the abstract rather than in real life, a fact that suggests they merely like the *idea* of going to church.

Chapter 8 Quotes

I remember watching an episode of *The West Wing* about education in America, which the majority of people rightfully believe is the key to opportunity. In it, the fictional president debates whether he should push school vouchers (giving public money to schoolchildren so that they escape failing public schools) or instead focus exclusively on fixing those same failing schools. That debate is important, of course—for a long time, much of my failing school district qualified for vouchers—but it was striking that in an entire discussion about why poor kids struggled in school, the emphasis rested entirely on public institutions. As a teacher at my old high school told me recently, "They want us to be shepherds to these kids. But no one wants to talk about the fact that many of them are raised by wolves."

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Vance reveals his belief that the working class's problems are too often addressed in the wrong way. In this case, he finds it inefficient and ill-advised to place all of the "emphasis" on "public institutions" rather than on an investigation of the sociological factors contributing to students' failure in school. This, of course, is in keeping with his political view (which emerges more fully-formed later in *Hillbilly Elegy*) that public policy can't solve the problems that take root in a community's smaller-scale institutions. The family, for instance, is one of these institutions. This is what the teacher he spoke to referred to when she said that "no one wants to talk about the fact that many of [these students] are raised by wolves." According to this logic, the influence of unstable parents who don't promote the importance of education is the most pressing concern regarding whether or not a student will succeed in school. Because Vance believes no public policy will be able to change these kind of private family dynamics, he invests himself in the idea that change must take place on a smaller, more organic level.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ As my job taught me a little more about America's class divide, it also imbued me with a bit of resentment, directed toward both the wealthy and my own kind. The owners of Dillman's were old-fashioned, so they allowed people with good credit to run grocery tabs, some of which surpassed a thousand dollars. I knew that if any of my relatives walked in and ran up a bill of over a thousand dollars, they'd be asked to pay immediately. I hated the feeling that my boss counted my people as less trustworthy than those who took their groceries home in a Cadillac. But I got over it: One day, I told myself, I'll have my own damned tab.

I also learned how people gamed the welfare system. They'd buy two dozen-packs of soda with food stamps and then sell them at a discount for cash. They'd ring up their orders separately, buying food with food stamps, and beer, wine, and cigarettes with cash. They'd regularly go through the checkout line speaking on their cell phones. I could never understand why our lives felt like a struggle while those living off of government largesse enjoyed trinkets that I only dreamed about.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

Vance writes this regarding his time as a teenage cashier at a local grocery store called Dillman's. In relating his experience as a passive observer at the cultural hub of his community—for everybody in Middletown passed through the grocery store—he shows readers just how noticeable the class divide was. Indeed, according to this account, the citizens of Middletown could be broken into three distinct categories: first there were the financially stable—if not affluent—townspeople, who drove Cadillacs and were allowed to put their groceries on a tab; second, there were the working poor people, who didn't have many luxuries but worked hard to stay afloat; finally, there were the nonworking poor, who didn't work hard to stay afloat but *did* enjoy certain luxuries. These luxuries, Vance noticed, came from the government, a fact that frustrated him because he could only ever "dream" about having the "trinkets" that the nonworking poor had access to, despite the fact that they did nothing to "deserve" such amenities. Since Vance has already established that the hillbilly community tends to adhere to the same values, it's noteworthy that he delineates himself from the nonworking poor in this passage, as it is one of the book's first indications that the contemporary hillbilly identity is moving away from its defining traits.

❝ The problems of our community hit close to home. Mom's struggles weren't some isolated incident. They were replicated, replayed, and relived by many of the people who, like us, had moved hundreds of miles in search of a better life. There was no end in sight. Mamaw had thought she escaped the poverty of the hills, but the poverty—emotional, if not financial—had followed her.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker), Bev Vance, Mamaw

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

Vance highlights the idea that the "problems of [his] community" are inherited and passed along through generations. The words "replicated," "replayed," and "relived" support this notion, calling to mind the fact that Mamaw and Papaw fought terribly in front of Bev, who clearly internalized their struggle and allowed it to regenerate in her own life. This is why Vance says that poverty is "emotional, if not financial," a statement that suggests somebody can suffer the scars of poverty even if he or she no longer struggles with money. If the values inherent in poverty and the hillbilly identity inadvertently perpetuate violence and instability, and if those problems "replicate" down through the generations, even upwardly mobile hillbillies will find themselves battling the demons of poverty. As he later discusses, Vance himself is an example of somebody who still grapples with "emotional" poverty despite his financial success.

❝ We choose not to work when we should be looking for jobs. Sometimes we'll get a job, but it won't last. We'll get fired for tardiness, or for stealing merchandise and selling it on eBay, or for having a customer complain about the smell of alcohol on our breath, or for taking five thirty-minute restroom breaks per shift. We talk about the value of hard work but tell ourselves that the reason we're not working is some perceived unfairness: Obama shut down the coal mines, or all the jobs went to the Chinese. These are the lies we tell ourselves to solve the cognitive dissonance—the broken connection between the world we see and the values we preach.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Vance proposes in this passage that the fabrications his fellow hillbillies perpetuate are the result of a "cognitive dissonance." This dissonance is created by the fact that their values—values that spring forth from the hillbilly identity, which prizes hard work and loyalty and honor—don't seem to be compatible with the contemporary world. For the majority of this paragraph, Vance takes a critical stance, lightly scolding his community members for using Obama or the Chinese as scapegoats to avoid admitting their own faults and culpability. But in the last sentence, he appears to back off, admitting that there is indeed a "broken connection between" the hillbilly worldview and the current American economic and cultural landscape. This is not say, however, that he approves of the tendency to blame anybody but oneself in order to avoid hard work. Rather, it is simply a way of acknowledging that there are many factors contributing to the disenfranchisement of the white working class—some of these factors have to do with the world as it is right now, and some of them have to do with a lack of agency that enables hillbillies to shirk responsibility.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Every time the drill instructor screamed at me and I stood proudly; every time I thought I'd fall behind during a run and kept up; every time I learned to do something I thought impossible, like climb the rope, I came a little closer to believing in myself. Psychologists call it "learned helplessness" when a person believes, as I did during my youth, that the choices I made had no effect on the outcomes in my life. From Middletown's world of small expectations to the constant chaos of our home, life had taught me that I had no control. Mamaw and Papaw had saved me from succumbing entirely to that notion, and the Marine Corps broke new ground. If I had learned helplessness at home, the Marines were teaching learned willfulness.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker), Papaw , Mamaw

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

It is worth noting that Vance frames his experience in the Marines as something that contributed to his success, because for all intents and purposes, he views education in the same way. Both the Marines and education taught him that hard work had observable results, a lesson that was incredibly valuable after having spent 18 years in an environment over which he had no control and that fostered little but violence and destructive behavior. The "learned willfulness" he mastered in the Marines by doing things he thought were "impossible" ended up applying to his experience in higher education, where he had to commit himself to overcoming challenging academic work. The Marines gave order to his life where it previously had none. And in doing so, they taught him to believe in himself, thereby giving him the tools with which to counteract the "learned helplessness" he had adopted as a child.

For all my grandma's efforts, for all of her "You can do anything; don't be like those fuckers who think the deck is stacked against them" diatribes, the message had only partially set in before I enlisted. Surrounding me was another message: that I and the people like me weren't good enough; that the reason Middletown produced zero Ivy League graduates was some genetic or character defect. I couldn't possible see how destructive that mentality was until I escaped it. [...]

I'm not saying ability doesn't matter. It certainly helps. But there's something powerful about realizing that you've undersold yourself—that somehow your mind confused lack of effort for inability. This is why, whenever people ask me what I'd most like to change about the white working class, I say, "The feeling that our choices don't matter."

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker), Mamaw

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Vance circles back here to his earlier consideration regarding the difference between talent and hard work. The mentality that surrounded him in Middletown was that working-class kids didn't have what it took to be upwardly mobile—a dangerous perspective to adopt because it frames success as inherently unattainable. This is the kind of thinking that leads hillbillies to think that their "choices don't matter." Unfortunately, Vance illustrates, the toxicity of this narrative is difficult to recognize from within; one must "escape" it in order to fully realize how "destructive" it

is to young people who might otherwise try to ascend the socioeconomic ladder.

Chapter 11 Quotes

One Friday morning I dropped off my rent check, knowing that if I waited another day, the fifty-dollar late fee would kick in. I didn't have enough money to cover the check, but I'd get paid that day and would be able to deposit the money after work. However, after a long day at the senate, I forgot to grab my paycheck before I left. By the time I realized the mistake, I was already home, and the Statehouse staff had left for the weekend. On that day, a three-day payday loan, with a few dollars of interest, enabled me to avoid a significant overdraft fee. The legislators debating the merits of payday lending didn't mention situations like that. The lesson? Powerful people sometimes do things to help people like me without really understanding people like me.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Vance writes this regarding his time spent working at the Statehouse in Columbus, Ohio, where he went to college. During this time, Ohio politicians were trying to do away with payday loans, which are short-term loans that have incredibly high interest rates. Many people believe payday lenders take advantage of poor people in desperate situations, allowing them to borrow money but ultimately forcing them into more debt because of the high interest that the borrowers have to pay back. As somebody who has benefited from using payday loans, Vance disagrees with this outlook, instead thinking that these sorts of loans can, if used responsibly, "enable" poor people to avoid bad financial situations. His assertion that "powerful people sometimes do things to help people like [him] without really understanding" them demonstrates his belief that the rich and poor need to find a way to better comprehend one another. If the upper class had a stronger conception of what it means to be poor—of what it feels like to be in a financial pinch—they might actually find themselves in a position to help. As it stands, Vance upholds that there is too much of a disconnect between the two classes.

The Great Recession, and the not-great recovery that followed, had hastened Middletown's downward trajectory. But there was something almost spiritual about the cynicism of the community at large, something that went much deeper than a short-term recession.

As a culture, we had no heroes. Certainly not any politician—Barack Obama was then the most admired man in America (and likely still is), but even when the country was enraptured by his rise, most Middletonians viewed him suspiciously. George W. Bush had few fans in 2008. Many loved Bill Clinton, but many more saw him as the symbol of American moral decay, and Ronald Reagan was long dead. We loved the military but had no George S. Patton figure in the modern army. I doubt my neighbors could even name a high-ranking military officer. The space program, long a source of pride, had gone the way of the dodo, and with it the celebrity astronauts. Nothing united us with the core fabric of American society. We felt trapped in two seemingly unwinnable wars, in which a disproportionate share of the fighters came from our neighborhood, and in an economy that failed to deliver the most basic promise of the American Dream—a steady wage.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Vance enumerates the many unfortunate realities that contribute to the white working-class's sense of disenfranchisement. The "cynicism" brought on by having "nothing" to "unite" hillbillies to "the core fabric of American society" pervades the community, becoming something "almost spiritual." The language in this moment hints at how hillbillies feel—by framing working-class pessimism as "almost spiritual," Vance portrays the problem as vast and vague and, thus, seemingly impossible to address. At the same time, this is in keeping with Vance's overall argument that the challenges his community faces must be dealt with on a sociological level; if cynicism has become intangibly present in the society, government policy doesn't stand much of a chance of banishing it. The question, then, becomes how one can address a spiritual problem. The answer, Vance would say, is by trying to shift the community's attitude by preaching the value of personal agency and hard work.

We can't trust the evening news. We can't trust our politicians. Our universities, the gateway to a better life, are rigged against us. We can't get jobs. You can't believe these things and participate meaningfully in society. Social psychologists have shown that group belief is a powerful motivator in performance. When groups perceive that it's in their interest to work hard and achieve things, members of that group outperform other similarly situated individuals. It's obvious why: If you believe that hard work pays off, then you work hard; if you think it's hard to get ahead even when you try, then why try at all?

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

In considering the hillbilly community's dejection and social immobility, Vance turns his attention to the power of narrative constructions. He says that if people believe the surrounding structures of upward mobility are "rigged against them," there is less of a chance that they will be able to "participate meaningfully in society." This means that the hillbilly community's best shot at improving its situation is to change what they tell themselves about their prospects. More optimistic narratives, he illustrates, would act as "powerful motivator[s]" and ultimately improve "performance." This is because "if you believe that hard work pays off, then you work hard," and—as Vance has already made abundantly clear in *Hillbilly Elegy*—so many working-class whites currently shy away from hard work.

Chapter 12 Quotes

We do know that working-class Americans aren't just less likely to climb the economic ladder, they're also more likely to fall off even after they've reached the top. I imagine that the discomfort they feel at leaving behind much of their identity plays at least a small role in this problem. One way our upper class can promote upward mobility, then, is not only by pushing wise public policies but by opening their hearts and minds to the newcomers who don't quite belong.

Though we sing the praises of social mobility, it has its downsides. The term necessarily implies a sort of movement—to a theoretically better life, yes, but also away from something. And you can't always control the parts of your old life from which you drift.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

This passage solidifies the argument Vance has been making throughout *Hillbilly Elegy* about the best way to promote upward mobility. Here he finally suggests that, because people transitioning from one culture to another are statistically likely not only to never reach the upper class but also to fall back into poverty, the members of the upper class should open "their hearts and minds to the newcomers who don't quite belong." As an author, Vance is more interested in thoughtfully examining the origins of a problem than proposing specific measures to remedy that problem. As such, he often shies away from issuing prescriptive advice. This suggestion is no exception, as he doesn't clarify what it might actually look like if the upper class opened "their hearts and minds" to upwardly mobile working-class individuals. Nonetheless, this notion aligns with his hesitancy to embrace government policy as a means of addressing social problems. Indeed, his idea that wealthy people should try to warmly welcome outsiders is socially-oriented and community-based.

Chapter 14 Quotes

In my own head, I was better than my past. I was strong. I left town as soon as I could, served my country in the Marines, excelled at Ohio State, and made it to the country's top law school. I had no demons, no character flaws, no problems. But that just wasn't true. The things I wanted most in the entire world—a happy partner and a happy home—required constant mental focus. My self-image was bitterness masquerading as arrogance. A few weeks into my second year of law school, I hadn't spoken to Mom in many months, longer than at any point in my life. I realized that of all the emotions I felt toward my mother—love, pity, forgiveness, anger, hatred, and dozens of others—I had never tried sympathy. I had never tried to understand my mom.

Related Characters: J.D. Vance (speaker), Bev Vance

Related Themes:

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

Vance analyzes the "mask" he wore in the first few years

after having attained upward mobility at Yale. Though he wanted to be a "strong" individual with "no demons" or "character flaws," he was merely playacting, pretending that he wasn't "bitter" when in reality he knew he was. This "bitter[ness]" clearly influenced all aspects of his life, including his relationships. When he finally realized this, he turned his attention to the toxic way he approached his relationship with Bev. In recognizing that he should empathize with his mother, he essentially adhered to his previous idea that the upper class should open their "hearts and minds" to people on lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. By showing his mother "sympathy," he himself opened his "heart and mind" to the possibility that her struggle and station in life didn't disqualify her from kindness and acceptance.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

J.D. Vance begins his memoir by confessing that he still finds it absurd that anybody would want to buy his book. He writes that he's thirty-one and hasn't accomplished anything truly fantastic or extraordinary in his life. Yes, he graduated from Yale Law School—something he never could have imagined as a boy—but many people graduate from Yale every year. Vance tells readers that he isn't a politician or the innovative founder of a billion-dollar company, so he didn't write *Hillbilly Elegy* because of his accomplishments. Rather, he wrote the book to help people "understand what happens in the lives of the poor." Having grown up poor in an Ohio town in America's Rust Belt, his prospects were "grim." Nonetheless, he found a way to beat the odds and, because of that, now wants to show the world "how upward mobility really feels."

Vance establishes early in his introduction his interest in exploring both the path of upward mobility and *what happens after somebody migrates from one socioeconomic class to another. By calling his prospects as a young boy "grim," he recognizes the cynicism people often feel when faced with the idea of rising out of poverty and shows that even he—who ended up being successful—was not immune to this kind of pessimism. Furthermore, his desire to help outsiders "understand what happens in the lives of the poor" indicates his belief that America's class divide is first and foremost a social problem that can be addressed with open communication and empathy.*

Vance briefly outlines the demographic history of America's white working class. He makes clear that racial categories are unhelpful when it comes to understanding the kind of poverty he comes from, saying that, though he is white, he doesn't identify with "the WASPs of the Northeast." Rather, he comes from "the millions of working-class white Americans of Scots-Irish descent who have no college degree." For these people, he writes, "poverty is the family tradition," and they have incredibly strong cultural values, which outside observers have characterized as "persistent" and "unchanging." Loyalty is one of these values, an intense "cultural tradition" that sometimes goes too far, causing hillbillies—as Vance calls them—to distrust outsiders or different ways of thinking.

The fact that Vance traces the hillbilly identity back to his community's roots illustrates his belief that one must fully consider a group of people in order to understand them. It's too easy, he suggests, to simply put people into convenient categories based on race or economic standing—instead, one ought to investigate a community's origins in the hopes of discovering the things that contribute to its group identity. Ironically, the hillbilly distrust of outsiders makes it difficult to do this, ultimately isolating them from the greater U.S. population.

The first Scots-Irish immigrants to live in the United States arrived in the 18th century and found themselves drawn to the Appalachian Mountains, which run from Alabama to parts of New York state. Although this region is quite large, Vance remarks that "the culture of Greater Appalachia is remarkably cohesive." Unfortunately, though, the region is currently plagued by "low social mobility," "poverty, "divorce," and "drug addiction." As a result, the white working class has developed a deep sense of pessimism, a cynicism that studies have shown surpasses that of any other group in America. While Vance agrees that "reality permits some degree of cynicism," he believes something else is going on—something about the hillbilly attitude is fueling this pessimism in an unproductive manner.

Once again, Vance demonstrates the importance of turning to history to understand present-day trends. In doing so, though, he finds a disconnect between the "cohesive" community of Greater Appalachia and the problems of low social mobility, poverty, divorce, and drug addiction that afflict modern-day "hillbillies." This serves as the basis of his investigation into hillbilly culture, prompting him to explore his own personal history in conjunction with what's going on in the community at large.

The summer before he attended Yale Law School, Vance took a job at a local floor tile distributing company, where he hauled heavy materials with eleven other employees. The work was exhausting, but he needed the money before moving to New Haven, and the pay and benefits were good. A few months after he started, a nineteen-year-old boy came looking for a job to support his pregnant girlfriend. The manager not only hired him, but also gave his girlfriend an administrative position. But it wasn't long before the girlfriend regularly stopped attending work. She was eventually fired. The boy stayed on, though he himself skipped work at least once a week and took four bathroom breaks per day, often for more than thirty minutes at a time. When he too was fired, he was incensed, yelling at his manager: "How could you do this to me? Don't you know I've got a pregnant girlfriend?"

In telling this story about this boy and his pregnant girlfriend, Vance shows the lack of personal agency that he recognizes as a characteristic quality in the hillbilly community. The boy's question, "How could you do this to me?" reveals a mindset unwilling to admit fault. Rather than accepting that he had squandered his own opportunities, the boy decided to project blame onto his surrounding environment and onto the immediate structures of power around him. This ultimately robbed him of any form of agency, framing the situation as something that acts upon him rather than as something he has the power to control.

This nineteen-year-old imminent father was no anomaly: two other people were fired from or quit their jobs at the tile factory during the short time Vance worked there. Vance believes stories like these indicate that something troubling is going on in working-class America. While economists worry that the industrial Midwest is in decline due to the fact that manufacturing jobs have moved overseas, Vance points out that there is another problem afoot in Appalachia. He writes that *Hillbilly Elegy* is about "reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible," a book that reveals "a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it." His time in the tile business showed him that young hillbillies are not taking responsibility for their situations, preferring instead to blame their misfortune on other people or on abstract structures of power.

Again, Vance portrays the problems of the working class as rooted in bad attitudes that enable people to avoid assuming responsibility for their own actions. At the same time, though, he acknowledges that circumstances aren't ideal for them, and that upward mobility and personal agency aren't easy to attain. However, while this might be the case, the easiest thing to address and change is the hillbilly attitude regarding these circumstances rather than the circumstances themselves. Unfortunately, though, Vance's fellow hillbillies appear unwilling to do so, instead preferring to respond to their unfavorable situations in what he sees as "the worst way possible."


Vance reiterates that *Hillbilly Elegy* is a book that draws upon his own experiences. He isn't an academic, he writes, nor is he unbiased. Although his memoir takes into account certain statistics and generalizations, he primarily relies on his own experiences to assemble an image of working-class America. He writes that he has tried to remain as true as possible to reality and that, though many of the characters contained in his book are extremely flawed—addicted to drugs and violent—he loves them because they're "just a ragtag band of hillbillies struggling to find their way."

By emphasizing the fact that the story he's about to tell is real, Vance intensifies the emotional impact of his tale while also revealing his potential weaknesses as a narrator: because he lived with these characters, he is naturally biased. After all, he himself identifies as a hillbilly. This is an important thing to acknowledge in the introduction of an ethnographic memoir like Hillbilly Elegy *because it allows the book to be what it should be—a subjective (albeit informed) account rather than an objective study.*

CHAPTER 1

Although Vance's mother moved constantly for reasons he could never understand as a child, he always memorized his address in case he got lost. But he felt that his true home always remained the same: Jackson, Kentucky, a small town in the coal country of southeastern Kentucky. Vance spent every summer until he was twelve in Jackson, a community he learned was very cohesive. When a hearse would pass on the street, everybody would stop. Vance once asked his grandmother, whom he called Mamaw, why this was the case, and she responded, "Because, honey, we're hill people. And we respect our dead."

When Mamaw told Vance that they were "hill people," he received his first inclination that his family and community adhered to a strong, cohesive group identity. Because loyalty and honor are the strongholds of the hillbilly identity, it makes perfect sense that "hill people" "respect" their dead—just as they stand by one another on an everyday basis, they stand by one another in death. This ultimately underlined for J.D. just how important these values are in Appalachia.

In the 1940s, Mamaw moved with her husband—Vance's Papaw—from Kentucky to Middletown, Ohio, leaving behind the Blantons, her large family, which was well-respected in Jackson. Vance remembers traveling from Middletown as a child to visit Mamaw's mother and uncles, thankful for the retreat from Ohio, where he grew up. "In Jackson, I was the grandson of the toughest woman anyone knew and the most skilled auto mechanic in town," he writes. "In Ohio, I was the abandoned son of a man I hardly knew and a woman I wished I didn't." Whereas at home men flitted in and out of his life—briefly and disastrously dating or marrying his mother—in Kentucky he was part of a tight-knit family, admiring people like Uncle Teaberry, a mean old great-uncle who he both feared and admired, and Uncle Pet, a man who fully embodied hillbilly loyalty and honor.

Vance makes it perfectly evident that Jackson, Kentucky stood for everything he wished he had in his daily life in Ohio. In his description of the town and his relatives who lived in it, hillbilly virtues come to life. This gives readers an indication—by way of negation—that his childhood in Middletown sorely lacked stability and left the young Vance very little with which he could identify.

Vance's great-uncles used to tell him stories when he visited Jackson. One story, for example, spoke of a truck driver called Big Red. When Big Red was delivering a shipment and told Uncle Pet, "Off-load this now, you son of a bitch," Pet responded, "When you say that, you're calling my dear old mother a bitch, so I'd kindly ask you speak more carefully." Big Red refused to take back what he said, instead repeating the insult. Uncle Pet dragged the man from his truck, beat him unconscious, and ran an electric saw over his body. Big Red almost bled to death, but was rushed to the hospital and survived. Because he was, like Uncle Pet, "an Appalachian man," he refused to press charges. After all, "he knew what it meant to insult a man's mother."

Despite the fact that Jackson represented a positive familial influence on Vance's life, it's also clear that it embodied certain unfortunate aspects about hillbilly culture. Indeed, the hillbilly investment in loyalty and honor often leads to violence. Worse, this violence is condoned by the culture, as evidenced by the fact that Big Red didn't press charges against Uncle Pet because he "knew what it meant to insult a man's mother." There are, it seems, no consequences for violent behavior, so long as the violence itself reinforces hillbilly values.

Another family story goes as follows: when Mamaw was twelve, she walked outside and saw two men trying to steal the Blantons' cow, so she went inside, grabbed a rifle, and started shooting. One of the men collapsed after a bullet hit him in the leg. The other fled, jumping into the truck and screeching away. By the time Uncle Pet came outside to see what was going on, Mamaw was standing over the thief with the rifle aimed at his head. Uncle Pet stopped his younger sister, but Vance is convinced she would have pulled the trigger because "she loathed disloyalty, and there was no greater disloyalty than class betrayal." Despite the vice these stories conveyed, Vance loved listening to them because they communicated a sense of "hillbilly justice" that placed him and his family firmly on "the right side" of "classic good-versus-evil" tales.

Once again, storytelling bolsters the hillbilly identity and imbues it with violent overtones. It's interesting that Vance saw these tales as placing his family members on the "right side" of each dispute, even though they were the ones to escalate each situation by quickly resorting to violence. This clearly didn't matter to the young J.D., and, as such, violence was framed as a means by which somebody could enforce "hillbilly justice." Rather than framing fighting as something to avoid, his family framed it as a way of doing the right thing.

Vance explains that Appalachia has taken a turn for the worse in terms of poverty and drug abuse. In recent trips to Jackson, he has noticed an increase in decrepit buildings, and statistics tell him of prescription drug epidemics and failing public school systems. These unfortunate circumstances have led Appalachians to embrace a closed-off attitude; they detest any form of national attention placed on the community's plight, and insist on "avoiding" their problems by "pretending better truths exist." And Vance writes that these problems aren't limited to Jackson or even to Appalachia, due to large-scale migrations from the region to states like Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. "If the problems start in Jackson," he writes, "it is not entirely clear where they end."

Yet again, Vance expresses uncertainty regarding the nature of the problems plaguing his community. The fact that it is "not entirely clear" where these problems end makes it harder to address them in the first place. This kind of ambiguity ultimately enables working-class hillbillies to simply accept their circumstances, allowing themselves to pretend "better truths exist." Vance, though, is unsatisfied by this complacent attitude, and it is this dissatisfaction that drives his quest in Hillbilly Elegy *to examine the specific nature of the working class's problems.*

CHAPTER 2

Vance writes that Mamaw and Papaw's presence in his life was the best thing to ever happen to him. He then gives a brief overview of their personal histories. As a teenager, Papaw lived next to the Blantons with his grandfather, spending much of his time running around with the wild Blanton men (Vance's great-uncles). It wasn't long before he and Mamaw became involved romantically, and in 1946 Mamaw got pregnant at the age of 13. Papaw was 16 at the time. Fearful that the Blanton men would defend their little sister's honor by harming Papaw, and hoping Ohio would provide them with better economic prospects, the young couple fled Jackson, but their child died within a week of having been born. Still, they stayed in Middletown, Ohio, where Papaw got a job at **Armco**, a steel company "that aggressively recruited in eastern Kentucky coal country" by promising hillbillies a better life.

In this summary of Mamaw and Papaw's history, Vance considers both the economic and cultural factors that contributed to the young couple's move to Ohio. On the one hand, they fled Jackson to escape the possible wrath of "hillbilly justice" meted out by the Blanton men. On the other hand, they left for more tangible economic reasons, since Kentucky coal country could only provide them with so much. This combination of economic and cultural considerations is a dynamic that runs throughout Hillbilly Elegy, *as many working-class people experience financial burdens while also navigating the values their culture promotes.*

Vance notes that **Armco**'s promise of a better life was, for the most part, true. He considers the two major waves of hillbilly migration from Appalachia to "the industrial powerhouse economies in the Midwest," explaining that the first influx came after World War I, when veterans couldn't find work in their rural communities due to the fact that these towns hadn't been industrialized. Mamaw and Papaw, Vance points out, were part of the second wave of hillbilly migration, which occurred in the 1940s and '50s. As such, they found themselves in a community of hillbillies despite the fact that they had left Kentucky. Still, though, they were estranged from their relatives back home, who resented them for getting "too big for [their] britches" by leaving behind "the stock they came from." To combat this sentiment, they visited home often.

Hillbilly isolation in the Midwest is an important phenomenon to consider because it exacerbates the extent to which working-class people in these regions have difficulty moving beyond the boundaries of their own culture. Not only is it challenging to rise out of poverty, but the hillbilly values of loyalty and honor inspire a sense of guilt in anybody who manages to attain a semblance of upward mobility. As such, hillbillies are inhibited from climbing the socioeconomic ladder for fear of being thought of as traitors.

While Mamaw and Papaw's relatives resented them for abandoning their home, their new neighbors "viewed them suspiciously." To these middle-class Midwesterners, hillbillies represented an entirely different—and rather disagreeable—lifestyle, and they were unhappy to see their town flooded by such newcomers. Vance references a book called *Appalachian Odyssey*, which points out that "the disturbing aspect of *hillbillies* [to Midwesterners] was their racialness. Ostensibly, they were of the same racial order (whites) as those who dominated economic, political, and social power in local and national arenas. But *hillbillies* shared many regional characteristics with the southern blacks arriving in Detroit." Furthermore, many hillbilly values were ill-suited for a place like Middletown, which was comprised of nuclear families who valued privacy. Hillbillies, on the other hand, were accustomed to barging into each other's houses and involving themselves in each other's affairs.

Vance builds upon the notion of hillbilly isolation, this time demonstrating that Appalachian emigrants are not only viewed as having betrayed their own culture, but are also actively kept out of the new communities to which they flock. Again, this makes upward mobility seemingly impossible, an attitude that further promotes cynicism within the working class when it comes to the prospect of climbing the socioeconomic ladder. By outlining this, Vance also emphasizes the cultural differences between hillbillies and middle-class populations. This encourages readers to consider the origins of this cultural clash rather than simply viewing the hillbillies as unfit for "civilized" life. In turn, he promotes an open-minded approach that prizes empathy and understanding.

Despite how hard it was to integrate into Middletown, Mamaw and Papaw slowly started to get used to their new life. In 1951 they had their first boy, Vance's Uncle Jimmy. For a while they achieved something like domestic bliss, but things didn't always work out well, usually due to their poor conflict-management skills. Once, when a young Jimmy was asked to leave a store after touching an expensive toy, Mamaw and Papaw barged in and cursed out the clerk before tearing items off the shelves and threatening to kill the employee. While Papaw was off at work, Mamaw felt isolated and alone, discontent with the middle-class expectation that she invest herself in "sewing circles" and "picnics."

Mamaw and Papaw's explosive rage at the store clerk once again demonstrates the unfortunate effect of hillbilly loyalty, which can so often lead to violence. It also emphasizes the divide they felt between themselves and the community they were suddenly expected to take part in. Unfortunately, because of their unstable home life, they were even at odds with themselves, leaving the family with no true means of support. They found themselves unable to fit into Middletown and equally unable to rely upon one another.

Although Mamaw and Papaw felt isolated from their culture, Middletown's values aligned with their belief in hard work and the American dream, a conviction that politically manifested itself in a staunch support of the Democratic party, which they believed represented "the working people." Mamaw used to tell Vance, "Never be like these fucking losers who think the deck is stacked against them. You can do anything you want to." Vance notes that this attitude was well-founded in the 1950s, when Mamaw's generation suddenly catapulted from poverty to economic stability. But he also remarks that wealth didn't necessarily change the hillbilly lifestyle; "[...] their financial success masked their cultural unease, and if my grandparents caught up economically, I wonder if they ever truly assimilated," he writes. Mamaw and Papaw escaped Kentucky to give their kids more opportunities to succeed—opportunities they expected their children to use to continue climbing the socioeconomic ladder. Unfortunately, Vance says, it didn't always work that way.

Mamaw's insistence that Vance not believe the deck was stacked against him illustrates her wise belief that members of the working class must have faith in themselves and that they must believe they are capable of overcoming difficult obstacles. In other words, she was promoting the idea of personal agency. The problem with the older generation's expectation that their children rise above them, though, was that they themselves were the only models of success that their children could reference. As such, it was nearly impossible to imagine other modes of upward mobility, so the community's growth stagnated after the productive economic surge in the 1950s.

CHAPTER 3

After Uncle Jimmy, Mamaw and Papaw had two more children: Vance's mother Bev and his Aunt Wee (her real name is Lori). Following several years of relative peace, Mamaw and Papaw started fighting frequently, usually spurred by Papaw's burgeoning drinking problem. During this time, their home life steeply declined in quality, as the two adult figures warred with one another and allowed garbage to pile up in the house. One night, Uncle Jimmy rushed downstairs to plead with his parents to stop fighting. As he did so, he watched Mamaw hurl a vase, which hit Papaw between the eyes and split his forehead open. Later, Mamaw told Papaw she would kill him if he ever came home drunk again. He eventually stumbled home one night after drinking and passed out on the couch, where Mamaw doused him in gasoline and lit him on fire. Luckily, Aunt Wee—who was only eleven at the time—jumped to her feet and extinguished the flames.

In the same way that Vance looks back on the history of hillbilly migration in order to understand the community's current problems, he now considers his own family's history. Despite the fact that his grandparents had achieved financial success, they appeared unable to apply this kind of stability to their domestic lives. This is perhaps because their new circumstances isolated them from one another. While Papaw was forced to navigate the working world of Middletown, Mamaw had to stay at home by herself. Rather than banding together in their respective struggles, they unfortunately went to war with one another, neglecting to support each other or their children.

Uncle Jimmy left the house when he turned eighteen and secured a job at **Armco**. This left his sisters in the middle of their parents' domestic disputes. Aunt Wee dropped out of high school at sixteen and married an abusive husband. This went against what Mamaw and Papaw had hoped for their children, for although they themselves modeled domestic instability, they believed their economic achievements put Jimmy, Bev, and Lori in a position to surpass their own accomplishments. Fortunately, Lori found a way out of her abusive relationship and secured a job working in radiology, eventually marrying a kind husband. As for Jimmy, he acquired a sales job and was the first Vance to have a "career." Unfortunately, Bev succumbed to the statistical odds that come along with growing up in an abusive household. Although she was incredibly intelligent and had succeeded in high school, she put off college, got pregnant, and found herself incapable of "settling down" because "she had learned the lessons of her childhood all too well." As such, she divorced her first husband after giving birth to Vance's sister Lindsay at nineteen years old.

When Vance says that his mother "learned the lessons of her childhood all to well," he frames domestic instability as cyclical. Of course, this makes it even more impressive that he himself was able to attain upward mobility and that he didn't fall prey to the statistics of growing up in an unstable household.

In spite of their fraught history, Mamaw and Papaw reconciled, and Papaw stopped drinking in 1983. Vance believes that it was around this time that they set to work making reparations for the chaotic and difficult life they had inflicted upon their children. First of all, they helped Lori escape her abusive first husband. They also lent Bev money to help her pay for childcare, gave her shelter, supported her when she frequently attended drug rehab, and paid for her nursing degree. Most importantly, though, they helped her raise Vance, acting as a support system that promoted stability in the young boy's otherwise hectic life.

Although Vance frames instability as cyclical, it's important to note that he provides many examples of people who have avoided or grown out of disastrous lifestyles. Mamaw and Papaw are perfect examples of this, since they stopped fighting and focused on making amends for the damage they'd inflicted upon Bev as a child. And because Hillbilly Elegy *is very much about debunking stereotypes, it's worth recognizing that Bev herself—a drug addict and unstable mother—was able to attain a nursing degree, an impressive accomplishment that does not fit into the derogatory notion that hillbilly drug addicts are unintelligent.*

CHAPTER 4

Vance explains that Middletown's inhabitants used to view the town as a highly respectable community. These days there are plenty of white people and plenty of black people, Vance writes, and the population is largely conservative, though "cultural conservatism and political conservatism are not always aligned in Middletown," especially considering the fact that people like Papaw were so committed to the Democratic party, or "the working man's party." Although the town was still thriving in the 1980s, it soon embarked upon a steep economic decline. "Today downtown Middletown is little more than a relic of American industrial glory," Vance writes. He explains that families are trapped in increasingly destitute living situations because of the declining housing market. After Presidents Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush both implemented policies encouraging home ownership, many Middletown residents bought houses that have now accrued so much debt that they're unable to sell them, since nobody would want to pay off so much of somebody else's mortgage.

The fact that many impoverished people are now trapped in a declining town furthers the idea of hillbilly isolation and hopelessness. After all, how could a working-class person hope to improve his or her financial situation if he or she can't even afford to move somewhere else and start anew? This greatly interferes with any form of upward mobility. Vance mentions that this is largely due to the policies of former presidents, a sentiment that foreshadows his eventual condemnation of federal policy and his argument that such measures are incapable of improving the working class's circumstances.

To make matters worse, with manufacturing moving overseas, the worth of **Armco** steel plummeted, even when the company merged with Kawasaki, a Japanese motorcycle company that essentially saved the town's largest employer from having to close its doors. Vance admits that he and his friends were unaware of this economic strife when they were growing up. They appreciated Armco's influence, since most of their fathers worked there, but did not aspire to work there themselves. Their elders reinforced this sentiment—"Your generation will make its living with their minds, not their hands," Papaw told Vance. In keeping with this, high school kids came to see Armco as an easy safety net, a place they could always fall back on. This attitude still prevails in Middletown, as one teacher at the local high school informed Vance. "It's like they can't make the connection between the situation in this town and the lack of jobs at AK [Armco-Kawasaki]," she told him.

In this section, Vance unearths a sense of complacency at large in the working-class hillbilly community, as young people thoughtlessly assume they will be able to find lucrative jobs without much effort. This complacency also bears with it a lack of foresight and an unwillingness to admit the true economic situation Middletown faces. Part of the population's inability to attain upward mobility, Vance suggests in this moment, has to do with the fact that they "can't make the connection between" their community's financial shortcomings and their own aspirations, which lazily don't take into account the fact that—unlike their parents' generation—Armco is no longer capable of providing support and economic stability.

Vance points out a contradiction in the idea that working-class Middletown kids should aspire toward something greater than manual labor. He writes that, though teachers never said so aloud, there was a palpable sense when he was growing up that he and his friends were destined for academic failure. "It was all around us," he writes, "like the air we breathed." In order to attain a career and intellectual work, it was necessary to go to college. And Vance knew nobody at all who had attended college. To make matters worse, when a Middletown kid failed to do well in school, there were no consequences. Parents and teachers alike would reason the failure away, saying, "Well, maybe she's just not that great at fractions." In this way, a strange narrative emerged that portrayed successful people as either lucky or born with incredible talent. Vance notes that—unfortunately—hard work doesn't factor into this conception of success.

Vance illustrates that all possibility of upward mobility is curtailed by the contradictory messages the working-class community sends its low-income students. By telling these students to aspire to career-oriented jobs but neglecting to emphasize the importance of academic success, the older generation sets its young people up for failure. This discounts the value of hard work, and the excuses parents and teachers make for academically unsuccessful kids tells the younger generation that their own shortcomings are not their fault. This attitude stands in stark contrast to Mamaw's advice to J.D. to not act like the deck was "stacked against" him. This is perhaps why Vance was ultimately able to lift himself out of poverty.

When Vance was in first grade, his teacher would choose a number and each student would deliver an equation that equaled that number. One day Vance said, "Fifty minus twenty," which won him two pieces of candy. As he swelled with pride, he heard another student say, "Ten *times* three." Vance was incensed—he didn't even know what multiplication was. "I didn't understand the difference between intelligence and knowledge. So I assumed I was an idiot," he says. Seeing his frustration, Papaw sat him down at the end of the day and taught him multiplication. From then on, they practiced math together once a week. And though Bev wasn't good with numbers, she took Vance to the public library before he could read, got him a library card, and showed him how it worked. "In other words," he writes, "despite all of the environmental pressures from my neighborhood and community, I received a different message at home. And that just might have saved me."

In this moment, Vance underlines the vital importance of education and the effect it can have on kids growing up in environments that otherwise provide very few opportunities. Once again, he shows that, despite his mother's drug addiction and instability, in some ways she transcended the stereotype of an unreliable hillbilly mother. By revealing both his mother's positive and negative traits, Vance seems to suggest that people are never just one thing, but rather capable of embodying multiple values at once.

CHAPTER 5

Vance learned when he was in kindergarten that his father, Don Bowman, was giving him up for adoption. Don was Bev's second husband, but they split up shortly after Vance was born. Not long afterward, Bev married Bob Hamel, who was kind to her children and legally adopted J.D. Nevertheless, Mamaw strongly disapproved of Bob because she thought he wasn't good enough for Bev. "What drove Mamaw's initial dislike were the parts of him that most resembled her," Vance writes. Despite Mamaw's feelings, Vance's home life was stable for a short stretch of time when Bob and Bev first got together. During this time, he developed a passion for reading that his mother encouraged by buying him books and praising him when he finished them. For all her flaws, Vance writes, his mother was incredibly intelligent and knew the value of a solid education. Everybody agreed she was the smartest person they knew.

Given the fact that she hated "class betrayal," it is interesting that Mamaw disliked Bob because he had the same background as her. This speaks to the extent to which hillbilly parents wanted their children to surpass them on the socioeconomic ladder. Otherwise fiercely loyal to her roots and the people that made up her community, Mamaw desperately wanted Bev to rise to a higher station in life, which would have meant avoiding people like Bob. This attitude seemingly filtered down into the next generation as well, considering that Bev tried to instill in J.D. the importance of education despite the fact that she herself didn't go to college.

As Vance progressed through school, he learned that the hillbilly preoccupation with loyalty and honor often led to schoolyard fights, a pastime that even Mamaw subtly condoned by telling him that it was acceptable to fight as long as it was defensive and preserved his family's honor. As such, he found himself entangled in many scraps until Mamaw corrected herself, telling him to only fight when it was absolutely necessary. Her tune changed again, though, when Vance told her about a bully who was picking on a helpless boy at school. She advised him to stand up for the poor victim, which he did, punching the bully so hard in the stomach that he worried he'd killed him. When Mamaw heard about this, she praised him for doing the right thing. Vance writes that this was his last fight.

Yet again, Vance shows that the hillbilly identity promotes the importance of honor and loyalty even if that means becoming violent. With this kind of attitude, it's unsurprising that Mamaw's first instinct when it came to domestic disputes and conflict resolution was to scream and fight.

When Vance was nine, his home life deteriorated because his mother and Bob decided to move away from Middletown, thereby cutting him off from Mamaw and Papaw, the most dependable adult figures in his life. Not long after, Bev and Bob started fighting, and because Bev had inherited Mamaw's characteristic fury, she never backed down from a conflict, a trait that always seemed to escalate any dispute. As they argued about their reckless monetary spending, the rows turned violent. One night, Vance woke up to their screams, went downstairs, and punched Bob in the face to protect his mother, effectively ending the fight. In the midst of such turbulent domestic disputes, he started doing badly at school. In addition, he put on weight and developed psychosomatic symptoms that reflected his difficult home life. At the same time, he came to crave the drama created by the conflicts he feared so much.

Vance demonstrates the very linear nature of how people inherit the culture of violence. Having watched Mamaw and Papaw fight at home, Bev fought in the same manner with Bob. In turn, J.D. witnessed this, meaning that his model for adult arguments centered around screaming and physical fighting. Once again, Vance shows that such habits are difficult to break out of, a fact that is important to remember when considering why people have such a hard time surpassing their elders on the socioeconomic ladder. In short, humans tend to pattern their own lives based on the examples they've grown up with.

One day, Vance came home and saw Mamaw's car in the driveway. He learned that she had come because Bev had attempted to commit suicide after Bob discovered she was having an affair and demanded a divorce. In response, Bev drove her van into a telephone pole, though Mamaw suspected she was only trying to take attention away from her own wrongdoing. Not long thereafter, the family moved (without Bob) into a house extremely close to Mamaw and Papaw in Middletown. Unfortunately, this didn't calm Bev, whose behavior grew more and more unpredictable. She started staying out late and partying with strangers, often not coming home until after Lindsay, who was a teenager involved in her own nighttime activities. On top of this lifestyle, she had a new boyfriend every month, bringing even more instability into J.D.'s young life.

Whether or not Bev's attempt at suicide was carried out in earnest, there's no doubt that it profoundly affected J.D., who was already feeling the effects of an unstable domestic life. When Bev's behavior grew increasingly erratic in the aftermath of the car crash, Vance was thrown deeper into a life in which he had very little that he could count on. There is no question that this sort of uncertainty would make it even harder to conceive of the possibility of upward mobility, ultimately trapping young J.D. in an existence void of valuable resources and opportunities.

When Vance was particularly angry with his mother one day (he doesn't remember why), Bev apologized profusely and offered to buy him something at the mall. On the way, though, he said something that upset her, and she sped the car up to top speed, saying she was going to crash and kill them both. Vance jumped into the backseat to protect himself, at which point Bev pulled over so that she could hit him. When she stopped he dashed away, running through a large field and eventually emerging in a woman's backyard. As the woman floated in an aboveground swimming pool, he told her that his mother was chasing him and asked her to call Mamaw. The woman rushed him inside and gave him the phone. Bev arrived and started pounding on the door and making threats before breaking it down and dragging her son away. Unbeknownst to Vance, though, the woman had called the police, who arrived and arrested Bev.

In this moment, Bev's behavior toward Vance became pointedly malicious for the first time. In turn, readers begin to sense the intensity of what Vance was up against as a child. Not only were the circumstances he grew up in generally unstable, but his mother sometimes revealed herself to be outwardly antagonistic toward him. Furthermore, the fact that she had no problem breaking down a stranger's door recalls Vance's earlier assertion that hillbillies paid little heed to notions of privacy—a trait that was poorly received by the middle-class residents of Ohio, who adhered to a set of societal norms that respected the notion of privacy.

Bev was released on bond, and Vance was asked to speak at her hearing. Understanding that her fate—and his ability to see her—depended upon what he said, he lied to the court, stating that she had never threatened him. In return, he made a deal with his mother that he could live with Mamaw and Papaw whenever he wanted, a deal Mamaw reinforced my promising that if Bev had a problem with this arrangement, she "could talk to the barrel of Mamaw's gun." "This was hillbilly justice," Vance writes, "and it didn't fail me."

The importance of loyalty to hillbillies becomes even more evident when Vance writes about lying to the court in order to protect his mother, who had tried to kill him. Indeed, it seems he would have rather continued to suffer his mother's wrath than betray a family member, a fact that illustrates just how committed to—and entangled in—the hillbilly identity he was even from an early age.

CHAPTER 6

Vance takes a moment to sing the praises of his sister Lindsay, who served as his protector when Bev's life was chaotic and dangerous. Indeed, he admits that he always saw Lindsay as "more adult than child," a perception that started to become even clearer when, as a late teenager, she had an opportunity to follow her dreams of being a model. Hoping to catch a break and kickstart her career, she convinced her mother and Mamaw to drive her to a local hotel, where an agency was holding auditions. When they got there, they asked if J.D. would like to be considered, too, an offer he happily accepted. By day's end, they were told that they had advanced to the next round, which would be held in New York City. They were giddy with excitement on the ride home until Bev expressed concerns about being able to pay for the opportunity. This led to a heated fight in which Bev slapped and punched the kids while driving, until Mamaw threatened to shoot her in the face if she didn't calm down.

The fact that Lindsay and J.D. couldn't go to New York to pursue the possibility of being models demonstrates the limitations that were placed upon their lives due to their family's economic standing. Furthermore, Bev's violent reaction is in keeping with Vance's description of the hillbilly tendency to settle conflicts using violence. Ironically, she only stops hitting her children when her mother threatens to shoot her in the face. In this way, Mamaw condemns using violence while simultaneously promoting the effectiveness of physical threats when it comes to conflict resolution.

When they got home from the modeling audition, Vance spoke to Mamaw in private, asking, "Mamaw, does God love us?" To his surprise, his grandmother hugged him and started crying. She was a very religious person, Vance says, though she didn't go to church. Rather, she held tightly to Christian values while adhering to her own rules. Vance writes that by asking Mamaw this question, he was seeking for "reassuran[ance]" that his religion "could still make sense of the world [he] lived in."

When Vance says that he sought reassurance from Mamaw that religion "could still make sense of the world" he lived in, he suggests that he yearned for some sort of stability, or something he could invest himself in that might help him conceptualize his otherwise hopeless circumstances. This impulse to search for stability in religion foreshadows his later interest in Christianity and his eventual belief that a church can give a young person a dependable community.

As time went on, Bev's romantic partners continued to come in and out of Vance's life, and it became clear that Bob Hamel had no intention of keeping up with his role as J.D.'s adoptive father. Sensing this, Bev encouraged her son to call Don Bowman one day, a suggestion that prompted J.D. and his biological father to slowly rekindle their relationship. Despite what he had been told, Vance learned that his father was a kind man. Mamaw and Bev had insisted that he was abusive, but Don denied this. He had also become religious, a devoted Christian who was very involved in church life. Contrary to Bev's assertion that Don had willingly given J.D. up for adoption, Vance learned that his father had fought hard for custody until, seeing that it was taking a psychological toll on his son, he relented and let Bev have full custody.

Vance's biological father played an important role in his life, largely because his absence was perhaps the first indication to J.D. that he could not depend upon his immediate family to support him. That Mamaw eagerly propagated an unfavorable narrative about Don once again shows her loyalty, for she most likely told Vance that Don was a bad man in order to take Bev's side of the conflict.

Vance started visiting Don, impressed by the stable life he led. It became clear to him that his father's church provided a wonderful support system; "When someone needed a job, church friends could either provide one or make introductions. When Dad faced financial troubles, his church banded together and purchased a used car for the family. In the broken world I saw around me—and for the people struggling in that world—religion offered tangible assistance to keep the faithful on track." J.D. gravitated toward this church himself, happy to be involved in such a community even though it meant renouncing Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, gay people, and secular fantasy books. In retrospect, Vance recognizes the intensity of this particular religious following, but at the time he didn't realize that these views "were sowing the seeds for an outright rejection of the Christian faith."

Don Bowman's church finally provided Vance with the stability and community he yearned for. Earlier, when he asked Mamaw if God loved their family, he was trying to determine if religion could "make sense of the world" he lived in. Unfortunately, Mamaw didn't go to church, and so her religiosity lent no real stability to Vance's life. When he witnessed his father's church community, though, he suddenly saw that religion could indeed provide support for people struggling to survive in a "broken world." By writing about the church's willingness to help its members buy cars or secure a job, Vance proposes religion as a possible means of attaining upward mobility.


CHAPTER 7

Not long after Vance turned thirteen and Bev started dating a firefighter named Matt—with whom Vance still keeps in touch—Papaw died. The family found him slumped in a chair after not having heard from him for several days. Everyone was distraught, especially Lindsay, who fell to the ground and said that she had taken advantage of him. Vance highlights this as highly illustrative of his and his sister's views regarding parental figures, saying that "being able to take advantage of someone is the measure […] of having a parent." Because Papaw had just been working on Lindsay's car, she felt that she had unfairly taken advantage of him—*unfairly* because, as her grandfather, it was not his responsibility to help her.

Lindsay's belief that she took advantage of Papaw demonstrates the guilt she and Vance felt at having to ask their elders for help. This is, of course, a tragic kind of guilt, since children and teenagers shouldn't have to apologize for their neediness. The fact that J.D. and his sister felt this way illustrates the extent to which they felt abandoned by their mother, who should have been caring for them. This sentiment promoted a certain kind of independence that they had to adopt, though this independence is perhaps different from the kind of personal agency that Vance maintains is necessarily for attaining upward mobility.

The family had two visitations to honor Papaw's death. One was in Middletown, the other in Jackson. The audience was free to speak during the service, and Vance stood up and said a few words about Papaw. After, many people came and thanked him for what he'd said, but Bev kept her distance. Later, Vance found Mamaw in the corner, staring silently at the floor. In this moment, he saw that she was hurting, and he was surprised to learn that she was not "invincible." Afterward, she didn't allow him to stay the night with his mother, who eventually made clear that she was "bothered that anyone but her was grieving," since she believed her relationship to Papaw was special and that nobody had the right to be as sad as she was.

Hillbilly loyalty takes a strange form in this scene. By arguing that she deserved to grieve Papaw's death more than anyone, Bev demonstrated a skewed sense of loyalty to her father, who surely wouldn't have wanted her to interfere with her family members' mourning processes. Furthermore, Vance's disconcerting revelation that Mamaw was not "invincible" ultimately worked to further destabilize the small amount of constancy he had in his life, since Mamaw was the only adult left who worked to actively support him and help him succeed.

Soon after returning from Jackson, Vance walked onto Mamaw's porch to see Bev standing in a towel in her front yard and berating Matt, calling him a "fucking loser nobody" before turning to Lindsay and saying, "You're a selfish bitch, he was my dad, not yours, so stop acting like you just lost your father." Papaw's death revealed to J.D. what he hadn't seen before: his mother had already begun a drastic downward spiral. In the wake of Papaw's death, it emerged that Bev had developed an addiction to prescription pills.

Bev argued with her family members as a way of addressing the emotional pain she felt about her father's death. Once again, the hillbilly tendency to start fights in difficult times emerges as disruptive to family life, even if it is a coping mechanism.

When Bev went into drug rehab, Vance was hesitant to turn to Mamaw because he didn't want to burden her now that Papaw was gone. As such, he relied on himself and on Lindsay. They even enjoyed their independence, since it was the first time they didn't feel like they were encroaching upon somebody else's life. Still, they struggled, and J.D.'s school attendance plummeted. Once, Lindsay had to forge Bev's signature to appease the middle school that his attendance would improve. In this way, she became the adult of the house, if she hadn't been so already. When Bev returned, she brought with her "a new vocabulary," often citing a prayer that Vance argued merely gave "an excuse for people whose decisions destroyed a family." He writes now that "research does reveal a genetic disposition to substance abuse, but those who believe their addiction is a disease show less of an inclination to resist it."

Vance's thoughts about addiction are in keeping with his opinions regarding personal agency and the destructive narratives that run throughout his community. In the same way that blaming the government enables Vance's fellow hillbillies to ignore their own complacency, he argues that the idea of addiction as a disease gives drug abusers the idea that it is out of their control to "resist" harmful substances. Although he recognizes that the working class faces many challenges—and that drug abusers certainly must overcome certain biological predispositions—he stresses the importance of hard work, trying desperately to show that sometimes even valid excuses can keep a person from improving his or her life.

CHAPTER 8

Vance finished eighth grade and Bev completed a full year of sobriety. In addition, Lindsay married and had a child. In short, all was well. That is, until Bev decided she and J.D. would be moving to Dayton, Ohio to live in Matt's house. Dayton is 45 minutes from Middletown, a fact that distressed Vance because it meant that he wouldn't see Mamaw, Lindsay and her new baby, or his friends at school. Because of this, he refused to go, saying, "Absolutely not," before stomping away and leading his mother to believe he had anger problems.

For the first time, J.D. stood up for himself in the face of his mother's authority. Though he never frames personal agency as a rebellious act, it is evident that his declaration that he would "absolutely not" move to Dayton with his mother was the first moment in which he realized he could possibly have some control over his own life.

Bev scheduled a time for J.D. to meet with her and her therapist, an experience Vance writes "felt like an ambush." The therapist quickly took Bev's side, and it became clear to J.D. that she had formulated opinions about him based on what his mother had told her. To remedy this, he delivered a long speech that detailed the specifics of his life, though he intentionally left out elements of domestic abuse for the same reasons he hadn't testified against Bev after she was arrested for threatening to kill him—he was protecting her. Still, his point came across, and the therapist said, "Perhaps we should meet alone." Vance notes that he only told the therapist half of what he felt, leaving out that he felt trapped by the fact that he had nobody to turn to; Papaw was dead and Mamaw was aging quickly and seemed too frail to care for a 14-year-old boy.

By refusing to disclose legally condemning information about his mother to the therapist, J.D. yet again adhered to the hillbilly code of ethics, choosing loyalty over his best interests. Even though his life may have improved if authorities found out that his mother mistreated him, he chose to protect her. This makes sense when one considers the fact that the hillbilly identity was perhaps the only thing J.D. could rely upon. He had witnessed the most important people in his life—Mamaw, Papaw, the Blanton men—championing this mode of being, so to give it up would be to part with the only model of existence that had consistently remained part of his life.

Instead of following Bev to Dayton, Vance decided to live with Don Bowman, his father. Don was happy to have him, and the time they spent together affirmed that he was a kind man who could offer Vance a stable life. Nonetheless, Vance missed Mamaw and Lindsay, and after only a couple weeks at Don's, he decided to go home. Mamaw had told him the night before on the phone that she loved him and that she wanted him to know that he was always welcome in her house. The next day, Vance called Lindsay and asked her to drive him to Mamaw's. And although Don was disappointed, he understood that J.D. needed to be with his Mamaw.

Don's peaceful life was most likely disorienting to J.D. because it didn't embody the hillbilly values he'd grown up with. It was true that these same values often brought chaos and violence into his young life, but it was also true that the hillbilly identity was the only thing he had ever been able to invest himself in fully. In this moment, Vance illustrates how hard it is to give up one's cultural identity for the sake of upward mobility, which seems to demand that a person leave their previous life behind.

After living with Mamaw for the remainder of the summer before starting ninth grade, Vance agreed to move to Dayton, so long as he could keep going to Middletown's high school. Around this time, Bev and Matt's relationship took a turn for the worse; "Living with [them] was like having a front-row seat to the end of the world," Vance writes. Then one day Bev told J.D. she was getting married. "I honestly thought you and Matt were going to break up," he said. "Well, I'm not getting married to him," she replied. Apparently, she had fallen for her boss at the local dialysis center, who had asked her out to dinner the week before. His name was Ken, and his house was the fourth one J.D. had lived in in just two years.

Bev's decision to move in with Ken highlights her restless spirit. Rather than pursuing upward mobility or trying to improve her life by devoting herself to her children, she addressed her own unhappiness by constantly changing her immediate circumstances. These fluctuations, though, never inspired actual large-scale change, a fact that reinforces Vance's emerging portrayal of the cyclical nature of poverty, wherein a person simulates progress without actually making any tangible steps to climb the socioeconomic ladder.

One of Ken's three children fought with Bev, meaning that—because of hillbilly loyalty—he also had to fight with J.D. One night, J.D. heard this boy call his mother a bitch. And though he didn't even particularly want to fight, he made it "abundantly clear" that he was going to "beat [his] new stepbrother to within an inch of his life." In response, Ken and Bev decided to separate the boys, and J.D. and his mother went to spend the night at Mamaw's. Amidst this tension, Vance's grades suffered at school and he started experimenting with alcohol and marijuana. He also felt "detached" from Lindsay, since she'd established an adult life of her own with a happy family, leaving him "mired" in domestic discord and instability.

In this section, Vance allows his teenage experimentation with marijuana to represent the ways in which children take cues from their parents. Although he hated his mother for her drug addiction, he found himself dabbling with recreational drugs. By showing readers the cause-and-effect influence of his mother's addiction, Vance illustrates that this sort of behavior establishes patterns that keep working-class hillbillies in poverty, rendering it even more unlikely that they will succeed in securing any form of upward mobility.

CHAPTER 9

One morning after Vance spent the night at Mamaw's, Bev burst in and demanded that he give her his urine, because her employers were drug testing her. This was a blatant confession that she'd started using again, but she showed no shame, instead forcing the responsibility onto her son. J.D. lashed out at her, telling her she was a terrible mother and that she should stop "fucking up her life." He even told Mamaw she was a "shitty mother," too. Bev collapsed on the couch, wounded by his words. J.D. pulled Mamaw into the bathroom and told her that he couldn't provide urine because he'd smoked pot in the past several weeks (pot that he'd found at Ken's house). She told him that this wouldn't show up in a drug test, also saying, "I know this isn't right honey. But she's your mother and she's my daughter. And maybe, if we help her this time, she'll finally learn her lesson." J.D. recognized this useless logic, but gave his mother the urine anyway.

Mamaw's hope that Bev would "finally learn her lesson" if she and J.D. helped her exemplifies the tragic kind of loving optimism that ultimately keeps drug addicts from finally going sober. But it also demonstrates yet again Mamaw's sense of family loyalty. She made this clear by reminding her grandson of their familial ties to Bev, saying, "She's your mother and she's my daughter." Although she didn't like the implications of helping Bev in this context, Mamaw found herself unable to refuse a family member in need.

After Bev demanded J.D.'s urine, Mamaw informed her daughter that Vance would live with her full-time from that point onwards. As a result, Vance's grades vastly improved, along with the quality of his overall life. During this time, he got a job at Dillman's, a local grocery store, and frequently spoke with Mamaw about the problems their community faced. They were both disheartened and frustrated by "America's class divide," which J.D. witnessed as a cashier ringing up working-class whites who used food stamps to buy discounted products they later sold on the streets. Every other week, Vance received a paycheck and noticed the amount of money the government deducted for tax purposes. He also noticed his drug-addict neighbor buying T-bone stakes that he was himself too poor to purchase. This infuriated him. He writes: "[...] it was my first indication that the policies of Mamaw's 'party of the working man'—the Democrats—weren't all they were cracked up to be."

Vance rarely aligns himself with specific political viewpoints in Hillbilly Elegy, *but when he does, he adopts a fiscally conservative worldview, meaning that he bristles at the idea that the government should be allowed to heavily tax American citizens. It seems that this viewpoint originally took root in the sense of injustice he felt as a white working-class teenager who made enormous efforts to earn an honest living while other people in the same situation as him abused government benefits. He saw this way of living as deeply lazy and as a direct denial of responsibility and personal agency. As such, he embraces a political mentality that places emphasis on the individual's ability to empower him or herself rather than relying on government assistance.*

Vance explains that Mamaw's neighbor registered her house for Section 8, a government program "that offers low-income residents a voucher to rent housing" at reduced rates. Mamaw considered her neighbor's decision to do this a "betrayal" that would surely invite "bad" people into the neighborhood. While J.D. and Mamaw tried to make distinctions between the Section 8 residents and themselves, they had to recognize that they had a lot in common with them. In this way, Mamaw fluctuated between liberal and conservative viewpoints—one moment she would lament the fact that her neighbors were lazily living off the government's dime; the next, she would sing the praises of government policies that tried to help the poor. Remembering this contradiction, Vance says that he adopted this worldview, taking on both a frustration with white working-class people and a willingness to empathize with them.

The fact that Vance adopted Mamaw's flexible political outlook is significant because it gives readers a hint regarding how he manages to harbor such appreciation for his hillbilly culture while also harshly critiquing it. The key is his open-mindedness. Just as Mamaw held non-working whites in contempt for their laziness while supporting government policies that helped these same people, Vance allows himself to fluctuate between political viewpoints, an ability that enables him to thoughtfully consider all sides of the working class's current situation and therefore provide a unique and more comprehensive perspective.

As a high school student earning his own money, Vance was interested in the factors that drove the squalor he saw in his community. He read sociological books that analyzed economic trends—like the decline of manufacturing in Midwestern cities—but didn't feel they answered the questions he had about people like his neighbor: why she wouldn't leave her abusive husband, why she spent money on drugs, or why she refused to admit that her behavior was harming her daughter. It took him a long time, he writes, to realize that the problem hillbillies face "is a sociological one, yes, but it is also about psychology and community and culture and faith." Surveying his community's weaknesses, he says that children aren't given the tools to succeed and that people are too content to accept government assistance and unwilling to take responsibility. "We talk about the value of hard work but tell ourselves that the reason we're not working is some perceived unfairness."

Vance's open-mindedness allows him to examine the nuances of the working class's problems. He makes it clear that economic and political factors ultimately fuel hillbilly poverty, but he also maintains that the problem doesn't stop here. Rather, it encompasses "psychology and community and culture and faith." Once again, his comprehensive approach gives him a unique perspective, putting him in a position to recognize that the members of his community often sacrifice their personal agency and chances at upward mobility in order to live a life of complacency, all the while telling themselves that "the reason" they're not working is "some perceived unfairness" that is beyond their control.

CHAPTER 10

Vance's time in Mamaw's house markedly improved his academic performance—so much so that he was accepted to Ohio State University. Mamaw reassured her grandson that education was "the only damned thing worth spending money on," but Vance grew increasingly apprehensive, worrying that he wasn't ready to make such a commitment. He knew that going to college would be an investment in his future, but he didn't feel ready to *make* that investment. Instead, he decided to join the Marines. This came as a surprise to his entire family, given that he was chubby and lacked the discipline associated with military training. Nonetheless, he decided to go. This was shortly after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, but his largest fear wasn't that he would be killed in the Middle East. Rather, it was that he would return from boot camp (which lasted 13 weeks) to find that Mamaw had died.

At first, Vance's hesitancy to commit to Ohio State University may have looked like he was avoiding taking the necessary steps to attain upward mobility—the same kind of avoidance of hard work that so many of his community members had modeled for him throughout his childhood. Fortunately, though, his decision to delay his college education was actually a sign that he was thinking diligently about whether or not he would be able to get the most out of the program. He put off committing to college not because he didn't want to work hard, but because he wanted to ensure that his hard work would pay off. In other words, he was meticulously considering the circumstances surrounding his potential transition out of poverty.

Vance explains that boot camp taught him to believe in himself. As his instructors berated him, he stood proud and tried harder. "If I had learned helplessness at home," he writes, "the Marines were teaching learned willfulness." He carried this pride into his life, finding that—upon becoming a Marine—he could demand a new kind of respect from people. On his first visit home after graduating boot camp, a barber who happened to be a veteran gave him a free haircut. The barber was a man J.D. had known all his life, but this was the first time he'd ever treated J.D. as an equal.

The difference between "learned helplessness" and "learned willfulness" perfectly captures Vance's central thesis in Hillbilly Elegy*—namely, that the working class has created an unfortunate narrative of victimhood and "helplessness" that young people learn to turn to whenever they are challenged to rise above their unfortunate circumstances. "Learned willfulness," on the other hand, suggests that anybody can learn to work hard and avoid the pitfalls of complacency that threaten to keep people in a state of constant poverty and despair.*

In 2005, Vance learned that his unit would be going to Iraq in the late Spring. Mamaw was noticeably worried, but there was nothing to be done. As he waited to ship out, he tried to visit home as often as possible. Things were going well for everybody, though **Armco**-Kawasaki steel—who had long paid for Mamaw's health insurance—increased Mamaw's insurance premiums to a price she couldn't afford. To make up the difference, J.D. gave her $300 a month. She had never before accepted money from him, but now she took his assistance, a fact that made him feel empowered and independent. Not long after he started helping her financially, though, he received a call that her lung had collapsed and that she was in a coma.

Vance's ability to help Mamaw financially—and in such an important way—indicates just how successful he already had been in transitioning out of poverty and climbing the socioeconomic ladder. The fact that he felt empowered by this means that he also felt the benefits of having built up some personal agency—for the first time in his life, he didn't have to depend on somebody else. This feeling would have been unimaginable to him as child, when he felt trapped by his mother's bad decisions, which he couldn't change even though they so negatively affected him.

When it became clear that Mamaw was not going to come out of her coma, the family decided to take her off life support. Like everybody in the family, Vance was distraught, but he put on a strong face because he sensed that the family was "on the verge of collapse." To complicate matters, Mamaw had divided her will into three parts, one for each of her children—Bev's share, however, was to be split evenly between J.D. and Lindsay. This perhaps contributed to Bev's utter dismay and her heartless accusation on the way to Mamaw's funeral that J.D. and Lindsay were "too sad" and that they loved Mamaw "too much." According to her, she had "the greater right to grief because, in her words, '[Mamaw] was my mom, not yours!'" J.D. was outraged. Just as he was opening his mouth to respond with "pure vitriol," Lindsay said: "No, Mom. She was our mom, too," a statement Vance thought perfectly encapsulated everything he could possibly have said.

Bev's vindictive response to Mamaw's death recalls her wild behavior after Papaw died. This time, though, J.D. and Lindsay were adults and thus had the power to point out her selfishness. When Lindsay said that Mamaw was her and J.D.'s mother, she implied that Bev never truly supported her children. This statement goes against the hillbilly notion that family members ought to remain totally loyal to one another, but it also reflects the reality of the situation.

Vance explains that the last two years he spent in the Marines was rather uneventful, other than a transformative moment he had when he was in Iraq. This moment occurred when he was providing security to some senior marines. While he waited for them to finish their business, a shy Iraqi boy approached and held out his hand to receive some candy or school supplies. Vance gave him a small eraser, and the boy's face "briefly lit up with joy." Vance notes that until that moment, he had "harbored resentment at the world," but after seeing the boy's thankfulness for something so simple, he was able to see how lucky he'd been to have grown up in a nation that provided him with opportunity. Above all, he remains thankful for his time in the Marines, which taught him that he had undersold himself—during his time abroad and as a trainee, he learned that he could, if he needed to, push himself beyond his own expectations.

Once again, Vance emphasizes the importance of believing in oneself. That his success story begins with a realization that he had undersold himself aligns with his argument that the worst attitude a working-class hillbilly can adopt is one of helplessness. It's easy, he suggests, to harbor "resentment at the world," but this mindset only leads to a cycle of destitution and a lack of personal agency. Hard work and high expectations, on the other hand, can lead to financial stability, upward mobility, and a worldview that isn't built upon resentment.

CHAPTER 11

In 2007, after he finished the Marines, Vance attended Ohio State University. Although he was older than the majority of students, he found that most of the people he met came from similar places as him. Having learned intensity and discipline in the Marines, he applied himself to his studies with incredible energy, often sleeping only several hours a night. To avoid debt he worked at the Ohio Statehouse, and when this income wasn't enough, he took a second job at a nonprofit doing advocacy working for abused and neglected children. Though he didn't mind his busy schedule, it took a toll on his health. After finding out that her son was running a fever of 103°, Bev drove to Columbus and took him to the emergency room, where they discovered he had a staph infection and mononucleosis. Bev took him home, where he recovered for several weeks while feeling conflicted about his mother's kindness, since he didn't know how to reconcile her current loving attitude with her past mistakes.

Vance's inability to reconcile his mother's kindness with her past misdeeds is uncharacteristic of the author, who normally gives people the benefit of the doubt. Nonetheless, his hesitancy is understandable, given the fact that his mother was once so neglectful and self-centered. Above all, his reluctance to accept Bev's care illustrates just how emotionally scarring parental abuse and instability can be. Having become upwardly mobile and self-sufficient, Vance naturally dislikes allowing his mother to dote on him, as it symbolizes a regression into childhood—and moreover, a regression into a fantasy childhood of nurture and support that never really existed.

When he returned to Columbus, Vance took a third job as an SAT tutor. It paid so well that he quit his job at the statehouse, figuring that despite the fact that it was the job he liked the most, he would have to wait until later in life to choose rewarding occupations. In his second year of college, Vance worked even harder than he had during his first. He also found himself annoyed with some of his fellow classmates, who were younger, inexperienced, and judgmental of the military. One classmate in particular went on a rant during class about how soldiers tended to be unintelligent and bloodthirsty. Shortly after this incident, Vance decided to finish college as quickly as possible, plotting with his guidance counselor so that he successfully graduated from Ohio State in only one year and eleven months.

It should come as no surprise that Vance bristled against his classmate's narrow-mindedness, considering the fact that he himself is so willing to consider multiple different perspectives. In addition, his decision to put off rewarding work until he was more financially stable shows the extreme discipline he developed in the Marines—now he fully embraced a kind of determination that took into account the reality of his situation. This greatly contrasts with the attitude of many of Vance's fellow hillbillies, who constantly ignored reality and the economic constraints placed on them, instead choosing to do whatever they wanted despite the financial consequences.

Vance moved back to Middletown to prepare for law school, to which he had already been accepted. He stayed with Aunt Wee—who had taken Mamaw's place as the family matriarch—and worked at a tile factory. From his new vantage point, he was able to observe the cynicism most Middletonians had about their prospects. He writes that the culture had no heroes to look toward, and "certainly not any politician." Although Barack Obama was admired throughout the country, hillbillies were suspicious of him. "Nothing united us with the core fabric of American society," he writes. Nonetheless, one of the strongest elements of hillbilly culture, Vance says, is patriotism. When he was growing up, Mamaw and Papaw taught him that he lived in "the best and greatest country on earth." He writes that this gave meaning to his childhood. The fact that working-class whites no longer have any sort of political hero, Vance points out, means that they are losing what previously "bound them to their neighbors, that inspired them in the way [Vance's] patriotism had always inspired" him.

Yet again, Vance suggests that hillbillies are isolated from the greater American cultural landscape. Politically estranged and economically disempowered, they find it difficult to remain a cohesive community even within the bounds of their own culture. This is significant, considering that Vance has elsewhere emphasized just how strong and cohesive the Scots-Irish culture has remained throughout the years. Now, he suggests, things are changing, and it is because of the political, economic, and cultural isolation hillbillies are experiencing due to the deterioration of things that used to bind "them to their neighbors." Even patriotism, Vance upholds, is no longer able to unite the community. And as Vance's personal history exemplifies, a lack of support and communal stability leads to incredibly unfavorable circumstances.

Vance explains that many white conservative voters believe Barack Obama is a Muslim. He says that he has heard from multiple acquaintances and family members that Obama "has ties to Islamic extremists, or is a traitor, or was born in some far-flung corner of the world." "Many of my new friends blame racism for this perception of the president," he writes. "But the president feels like an alien to many Middletonians for reasons that have nothing to do with skin color." He proceeds by arguing that working-class whites distrust Obama because he attended two Ivy League schools, "is brilliant, wealthy, and speaks like a constitutional law professor." This, in combination with the fact that Obama "is a good father" and "wears suits to his job," makes it impossible for working-class whites to identify or relate to him; he is so far removed from the hillbilly life, Vance maintains, that hillbillies are inclined to distrust him.

Although Vance's theory about Obama's impressive credentials and sophisticated personality make sense when trying to determine why so many working-class whites distrust him, it fails to take into account that many white presidents have similarly astounding credentials and personalities. Indeed, the last five presidents (including Donald Trump) graduated from Ivy League schools. So while it seems logical that hillbillies distrust Obama because he is the antithesis of the hillbilly identity—to which they are so loyal—the fact that other white presidents have not been met with the same suspicion indicates that there is, in fact, a racist element to the white working-class's rejection of the first black president.

Vance outlines the idea that the "anger and cynicism of working-class whites" has to do with misinformation. He notes that a mere 6% of American voters think the media is "very trustworthy." As a result, people turn to the internet, where conspiracy theories run rampant. According to Vance, if a community doesn't trust the evening news or its politicians—or any of its other core institutions—it is unlikely to succeed. A narrative of isolation and pessimism has proliferated throughout the white working-class, one that seems to ask: "if you think it's hard to get ahead even when you try, then why try at all?"

Yet again, Vance returns to the idea that the isolation of the white working class leads to complacency and a loss of personal agency. When an entire community distrusts something as nationally accepted as the evening news, it's clear that they don't feel as if they're living in the same context as the rest of the country. This means that the idea of the American Dream—the idea of hard work leading to success—probably also seems suspicious, ultimately leading to an overall sense of apathetic complacency.

CHAPTER 12

When Vance arrived at Yale, he was surprised to see posters advertising an event with Tony Blair, the former prime minister of England. Not long afterward, he ran into the governor of New York. In class, his cohort was comprised of a first-generation Indian woman, a black Canadian, and a progressive lesbian, among others. Vance describes this group as "a kind of family." Although things were going well, he also sometimes felt he didn't belong. One professor fiercely edited his writing, and he heard that this same man believed Yale should only accept students from other Ivy League schools because it wasn't his job to "do remedial education." By the end of the semester, though, Vance had worked hard enough to convince the professor to reconsider this elitist opinion.

Vance felt like he didn't belong at Yale because of how hard it is to transition from the working class to the upper class, which Yale embodied. His professor's elitism serves as a perfect example of why, exactly, this transition often seems impossible. By revealing his own uncertainty, Vance shows that upward mobility is continuously fatiguing and complicated, and the difficulties don't stop once one has successfully lifted themselves out of poverty. Rather, there are always social obstacles to overcome.

On one of his first visits home, Vance saw a woman at the gas station wearing a Yale t-shirt. He asked her if she attended, and she said that her nephew did, before asking him the same question. Suddenly he was torn, unsure of where he wanted to place his allegiances—did he want to identify as a Yale Law school student or as "a Middletown kid with hillbilly grandparents?" In the end, he chose the latter, though he felt guilty to have lied. Vance writes that this illustrates the "inner conflict" that upward mobility can create. In fact, the term itself "implies a sort of movement—to a theoretically better life, yes, but also away from something." To avoid this kind of isolation at the top of the socioeconomic ladder, Vance suggests that the upper class should more openly welcome newcomers to insure that upwardly-mobile working-class people don't fall off the ladder once they rise out of poverty.

Vance's anecdote about his conversation at the gas station builds upon the idea that upward mobility is a process that continues long after a person manages to attain success. This is because it unfortunately seems to require that people give up their previous way of life. For Vance, this would mean betraying his hillbilly identity, an act of disloyalty that would trouble him and his relatives (one imagines Mamaw rolling over in her grave). In keeping with Vance's general approach to such problems, he suggests a social—rather than policy-oriented—solution, one that addresses how the upper class views upwardly-mobile newcomers. Once again, he advocates for open-mindedness and communities that work together across cultural and socioeconomic barriers.

CHAPTER 13

While at Yale, Vance fell in love with one of his fellow law students, Usha. He describes her as intelligent, direct, and infinitely knowledgeable not only about the world, but also about Yale, where she'd gone as an undergraduate student. As such, she became his "Yale spirit guide" and his general life coach as he navigated his strange new upper-class existence. In writing about Usha, Vance begins to consider the notion of "social capital," saying that "the networks of people and institutions around us have real economic value."

For Vance, the "networks of people and institutions" available to him as an upwardly mobile young man centered around Yale, which provided him with connections to open doors that would otherwise have remained shut. In some ways, Usha was one of these resources, considering the fact that she acted as his "Yale spirit guide." For the first time in his life, Vance had successfully built a support system for himself that extended beyond Mamaw's loving but inherently limited aid.

In addition to Usha's advice, Vance experienced more tangible forms of social capital, too. For example, every August, Yale Law School hosts recruiters from prestigious law firms. This is a "marathon week of dinners, cocktail hours, hospitality suite visits, and interviews." When Vance went through this experience, he was invited to one of New Haven's fanciest restaurants with a group of other students who were candidates for positions at a well-respected firm. He was baffled by the riches he witnessed in this restaurant, fumbling his way through the evening and trying to avoid making a fool of himself. At one point, he retreated to the bathroom and called Usha to ask her which of the many pieces of silverware he was supposed to use first. "The interviews were about passing a social test—a test of belonging," he writes. In the end, he received a job offer from the firm.

The fact that law firm interviews were "a test of belonging" once again illustrates why it is so difficult to attain—and then maintain*—upward mobility. After all, Vance had grown up without the lavish indulgences and customs that these law firms expected prospective employees to have. Without any knowledge of this social context, how could he possibly succeed? Fortunately, as Vance previously noted, "social capital" is comprised not only of institutional connections, but also* personal *connections—and because he had already been at Yale for a year, he had established some of these personal connections. As such, he was able to rely on Usha to help him navigate an otherwise unfamiliar rung of the socioeconomic ladder.*

One of Vance's professors, Amy Chua, helped him make decisions about his career and personal life. At one point, he decided he wanted to obtain a clerkship with a judge. Amy questioned his motives (it didn't seem to align with his career goals), but nonetheless connected him with a judge she knew. When he made the short list, she told him she didn't think he was pursuing the clerkship for the right reasons, advising him instead to focus on his relationship with Usha while figuring out a career path that made more sense. Vance listened to her, and to this day believes she delivered the best advice he's ever received. "Social capital isn't manifest only in someone connecting you to a friend or passing a résumé on to an old boss. It is also, or perhaps primarily, a measure of how much we learn through our friends, colleagues, and mentors," he writes.

Again, Vance demonstrates the importance of social capital, underlining how useful and necessary it is to be able to draw upon the wisdom of peers and mentors. Although the hillbilly community he came from was tight-knit (because of its commitment to the group identity), the individual members rarely banded together to share resources or knowledge. The only time Vance had witnessed this sort of communal support system was when he attended Don's church. Importantly, Vance managed to avoid falling off the socioeconomic ladder because he wasn't afraid to ask for help from people like Amy.

CHAPTER 14

In Vance's second year of law school, things were going well, but his relationship with Usha was showing signs of distress due to his hesitancy to open up to her. After returning from a bad job interview one night, he grew angry at her for trying to comfort him, accusing her of making excuses for his shortcomings and weaknesses. To avoid engaging in a full-fledged argument, he stormed out and walked the streets of D.C., where they had come to pursue several job prospects. He finally saw her sitting on the steps of Ford's Theatre, and though he expected her to be furious with him, she embraced him and told him that it was never acceptable to simply leave—that he had to learn how to talk openly with her, especially in times of duress. She then accepted his apology.

The kindness and patience Usha showed Vance stands in stark contrast to the behavior various adult figures displayed during his childhood. Conflict, Vance had learned, always led to heated arguments and violence. This was the hillbilly way (as Vance experienced it), which makes sense when one considers again how much the culture values honor—to give up a fight would be to give up one's honor. But Usha didn't learn these values, and thus had no misgivings about the positive power of open communication and heartfelt apology. In this moment, she taught Vance how to comport himself in relationships that existed outside the hillbilly community.

Vance writes that he still struggles with the impulse to fight and the tendency to approach situations with suspicion. But now he tries to shift away from these mindsets. He considers the effects of traumatic childhood situations on grownup hillbillies, wondering how much somebody should blame his or her upbringing and how much he or she should take personal responsibility as an adult. "How much is Mom's life her own fault?" he asks. "Where does blame stop and sympathy begin?" Vance himself is conflicted regarding this question, but he's willing to recognize that Bev is not a bad person—she loves him and Lindsay and did try (in her own way) to be a good mother. At the same time, he believes she deserves to shoulder a significant amount of blame because "no person's childhood gives him or her a perpetual moral get-out-of-jail-free card." Right as Vance was about to finish at Yale, he learned that Bev had taken to heroin. As a result, she missed his graduation ceremony.

The fact that Vance still has to work on controlling his temper reinforces the notion that the process of upward mobility is a constant battle, not something that ends when a person rises out of poverty. This is because it's not only a process of economic improvement, but also a sociological transition from one culture to another. Still, Vance doesn't allow himself to use this difficult transition as an excuse to perpetuate the irresponsible behavior taught to him throughout his childhood. This is what he means when he says that "no person's childhood gives him or her a perpetual moral get-out-of-jail-free card." Regarding his mother—who seems to believe that her childhood does *give her a "perpetual" right to act irresponsibly—Vance exercises his characteristic ability to hold two contrasting ideas in his head at once: though he detests her behavior, he recognizes her struggle and finds a way to love her.*

CHAPTER 15

Although Vance had promised himself to never help Bev again, he was unable to turn her away when she called him asking for his assistance. Her most recent husband kicked her out upon discovering that she'd stolen and sold his family heirlooms to buy drugs. So Vance drove from Cincinnati—where he was living with Usha, whom he'd recently married—and paid for his mother to stay in a motel room. He was frustrated to find himself at a rundown motel filled with drug addicts, but he recognizes that "upward mobility is never clean-cut, and the world [he] left always finds a way to reel [him] back in." Vance also recently started coming back into the Christian faith, so he was willing to show his mother extra kindness and sympathy.

Yet again, Vance portrays upward mobility as a complicated process that never ceases. And although he doesn't go into detail about his return to Christianity, he frames religion in this moment as something that can lend a person the strength he or she needs to do the right thing. For a person who grew up surrounded by irresponsible behavior and bad decisions, this moral compass is no doubt empowering.

Vance turns his attention to a question he often receives: is there anything that might "solve" the problems of the hillbilly community? He is skeptical of this question, for he recognizes in it a desire to find a "magical public policy solution." Public policy, he upholds, is ill-suited to address these sorts of problems, which have to do with "family, faith, and culture." At best, he thinks governmental policies can put a "thumb on the scale […] for the people at the margins," helping them ever so slightly to rise out of poverty. He points to a study that showed that places like Utah, Oklahoma, and Massachusetts provided the most amount of opportunity for working-class young people. Vance notes that these findings did not surprise him, considering the fact that these areas of the U.S. tend to have strong communities comprised of cohesive families (think, for example, about the Mormon presence in Utah).

Throughout Hillbilly Elegy, *Vance hints at his belief that public policy is an ineffective way of addressing the working class's problems, but in this section he explicitly makes this point by underlining that what hillbillies are suffering from is a cultural crisis. This, he argues, can only be remedied on a sociological level. Notably, he emphasizes the importance of strong families, relating this notion to religion by saying that it is no surprise that Utah—with its vast Mormon presence—is rife with opportunity for young people seeking upward mobility. As such, he shows his commitment to religion and family values.*

Despite the fact that he doesn't think policy change is the best way to address the problems of the working-class, Vance mentions that there are some small-scale measures that the government can take, like building policies "based on a better understanding of what stands in the way of kids like" him. This would mean, for example, implementing policies that recognize that "the real problem" for most working-class children is not what happens at school, but what happens at home. Vance argues that Section 8 housing would be more successful if the low-income houses were placed into more affluent communities, rather than isolated within already impoverished neighborhoods. Doing so would encourage lower-income kids to "rise up." Unfortunately, Vance argues, Middletown appears unwilling to adopt this strategy, clearly preferring to keep poor people "cut off from the middle class."

It is worth noting that even Vance's suggestion regarding how to improve the efficacy of public policy ultimately hinges upon a sociological understanding of the white working class's problems. As such, he makes clear that the only way to improve the community's situation is to fully understand it, which means that politicians must grasp the origins of the working class's problems. This stance essentially advocates for open-mindedness, insisting that anybody trying to help the poor should be willing to nonjudgmentally assess the circumstances that lead to hillbilly disenfranchisement.

The biggest obstacle standing in the way of working-class upward mobility, Vance asserts, is not a lack of policy but rather an unawareness of the community's prevailing attitudes. When he was a kid, he explains, everybody around him thought it was feminine to do well in school. If a boy succeeded academically, others called him a "sissy" or a "faggot." This attitude discouraged hard work, and Vance makes it clear that this terrible situation can hardly be addressed by a "new law or program." Rather, the community itself needs to find a way to alter the way it thinks about upward mobility and intellectual ability.

Once more, Vance upholds that the hillbilly community suffers from the destructive elements of its own self-narrative. Although the older generations want their children to climb higher than them on the socioeconomic ladder, they fail to see that their anti-academic mentalities make this impossible.

One day Vance was driving with Usha when another car cut them off. At the next stoplight, Vance opened his door and started to get out, ready to go scream at the other driver and, if necessary, fight him. But then he stopped, calmed himself down, and shut the door. Usha was proud of him for resisting the impulse to violently defend his honor. And though Vance himself was glad to have acted level-headedly, he brooded for the next several hours, turning the situation over in his mind. This, he says, is the effect of having lived for 18 years in a community that praised violence in the name of honor.

Vance provides this example to show yet again how much his personality is informed by the hillbilly identity. Decades after having listened to the Blanton men' stories about honor, loyalty, and revenge, he still finds himself clinging to the idea of "hillbilly justice." By refraining from getting out of his car, though, he activated his sense of personal agency, empowering himself to shift out of the hillbilly tradition in order to behave in a way that was compatible with his new life.

CONCLUSION

Vance identifies himself as a "cultural emigrant" who occupies a unique position, one that allows him to observe both working- and upper-class cultures. This perspective was especially noticeable as he stood in a Walmart not long ago. He was there because he'd volunteered to buy Christmas presents for under-privileged kids. Because he himself was once poor, he found it difficult to actually buy the presents the organization had suggested—they all seemed either useless or patronizing. In the end, he made his own choices about what working-class children might want to find beneath the tree on Christmas morning. He notes that he sometimes resents members of the upper class because they can be elitist. At the same time, he recognizes that he is happier in his current life, and he can't deny that affluent people tend to have more cohesive families, happier children, and higher church attendance rates. "These people are beating us at our own damned game," he writes.

It's significant that Vance writes that the upper class is "beating" hillbillies at their "own damned game." He has spent the majority of Hillbilly Elegy *showing how important family values are to hillbillies, so the fact that he admits defeat in this realm indicates that the other behaviors he's outlined about hillbilly life—instability, violence, drug abuse, complacency, a lack of personal agency—are so destructive that they impede upon the community's ability to successfully adhere to their strong family-oriented values.*

Recently, Vance took a teenager named Brian out to lunch at a fast-food restaurant. Brian reminds Vance of himself as a fifteen-year-old, especially because his mother is addicted to drugs and his father doesn't factor into his life. Several months later, Brian's mother died. "What happens to Brian?" Vance asks. "He has no Mamaw or Papaw, at least not like mine, and […] his hope of a 'normal life' evaporated long ago, if it ever existed." Although Vance isn't optimistic about Brian's prospects, he insists that the boy's only hope "lies with the people around him," people like Vance and the greater hillbilly community. Brian's success will ultimately come down to whether or not he can find a support system that promotes the idea of personal agency in the face of hardship. If Brian can "access a church that teaches him lessons of Christian love, family, and purpose," Vance believes he might attain something like stability and happiness.

Again, Vance highlights how impactful a strong support network can be for a young person struggling to survive poverty in America. He portrays the church as a place that provides stability and "purpose." His decision to use the word "purpose" in this context indicates his belief that religion can inspire otherwise cynical and hopeless people to cultivate personal agency that will encourage them to work hard to improve their lives rather than accepting defeat and blaming their shortcomings on external factors they can't control.


Vance closes by describing a recurring dream he's had since childhood, wherein he's trapped in a conference room inside a tree house with Lindsay and Mamaw. Suddenly, Bev enters and starts wreaking havoc on the room, upturning furniture and screaming. Mamaw and Lindsay escape through a hole in the floor, but J.D. is left behind. He wakes up just as his mother is about to grab him. He notes that he hadn't had this dream in a long time until several weeks after graduating from Yale. This time, though, *he* was the antagonist, and he was chasing around his dog, Casper. Finally, he caught Casper, but instead of hurting him, he looked into the dog's kind eyes and decided to hug him. He woke up feeling glad that he had controlled his temper. Usha slept peacefully at his side, and when he got up for a glass of water and saw Casper staring at him, he patted him on the head before returning to the comfort of his bed.

Vance's recurring dream represents the identity crisis a person must go through when climbing the socioeconomic ladder. Having achieved upward mobility, suddenly Vance becomes the antagonist in his own dream, a clear indication that he sees himself as having switched sides. He now regards himself in a negative light because he feels like a traitor, as he has "betrayed" his community by leaving it behind. And although the dream ends with reconciliation, it symbolizes the never-ending emotional and psychological complications a person faces after having been lifted out of poverty. Indeed, Vance frames upward mobility one last time as an endless process of guilt, self-realization, and adaptation.


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